

Stranger Things 3 by regachoisiah

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Gen

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Murray Bauman, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Sam Owens (Stranger Things), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Kali Prasad, Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington & The Stranger Things Kids, Steve Harrington/Kali Prasad, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

It's been one year since the gate to the Upside Down was closed. As life returns to normal for the citizens of Hawkins, several new threats arise;

A dangerous new girl has arrived whose secret agenda may leave several dead, a wealthy family moves to Hawkins for unknown reasons, Hopper's past comes back to haunt him, a deadly new human threat has followed Max from California, and a disturbing fact about the Upside Down is discovered.

Things are about to get even stranger.

(a hypothetical season 3, canon to the show)

1. Prologue: Beyond Hawkins

Summary for the Chapter:

Our story begins...

SAM OWENS

Date: Two years ago, the day that Eleven accidentally opened the gate to the Upside Down. Set a few hours after Eleven escaped the facility.

Location: The Hawkins Laboratory

"Dr. Owens, wait!"

Sam huffed in frustration as Private Gordon Pyle caught up to him. The blonde rookie bent over, trying to catch his breath. As soon as the soldier did, he accidentally shined his flashlight right in Owens' face, nearly blinding him. Owens shoved the light away, annoyed.

"Good god, Private, keep it together," Owens said, "It's bad enough that we have to deal with this mess. You're only making me more nervous!"

The soldier sighed, trying to calm himself down. "Sorry sir," he quickly said.

"Now if I only knew what kind of mess this is." This was truly the most baffling situation he had ever been in. Owens had dealt with top secret missions before, from Soviet Union conspiracies to wild goose chases. After working for the CIA for years, he thought he had seen it all. But this was the first situation he had been in where he had absolutely no idea what he had gotten himself involved with.

What was Brenner up to? Owens, despite his high-ranking status in the same organization, was on a need-to-know basis with Brenner. He knew about the 'Numbered Girls' (Owens: *"We really need a better name for your little pet project, Martin."*), he knew just how illegal the whole

operation was. However, he only knew the surface details. It reeked of the leftover scraps of Project MKUltra, which Brenner was also a part of. But despite knowing so little, Owens was glad to be separate from Brenner's madness. Seeing the destruction of the lab only confirmed this.

Owens and Private Pyle moved further down into the lab, right where Subject Eleven was being experimented on. What they saw nearly floored them.

It was a strange, fleshy...*thing* that had formed on the wall. It was pulsating, as if it were alive. Owens and Pyle turned to each other, not sure how to comprehend what they were seeing.

"So...this is what Brenner and his little girls were up to," Owens said.

"What the hell is this?" Private Pyle said. He did a sign of the cross, fearing that the devil's work was in play here. Owens could only eye roll at his little gesture but part of him wouldn't be surprised if this was a portal to hell.

As the two stepped closer, the fleshy mass slowly began to open. Pyle raised his rifle while Owens reached for his pistol. They aimed at the thing, not sure what was coming out from the other side. As the mass opened, the two lowered their guns when they saw what came out.

The little girl had long, crumpled-up silver hair. She looked dangerously anorexic and her clothes were tattered and worn out. After a quick study, Owens guessed that she should be around 12-14 years old. When she opened her eyes, Owens could see that her eyes were a dark, blood red. Pyle gasped at the sight and nearly raised his rifle on instinct.

"Holy shit," Pyle said, "It's a girl. From the other side of that thing."

"Um...sweetie?" Owens said, not sure how to address her, "Are you okay? Can you understand me? Don't worry, we're not here to hurt you."

The little girl raised her hands, scaring both Pyle and Owens. As she reached out towards Owens, she whispered one word;

"Estelle."

The girl then passed out on the ground. Immediately, Owens and Pyle ran to her, Owens taking her in his arms. The two then rushed out of the lab, hoping to save the girl in time.

KALI

Date: May 1985

Location: Women's restroom of an abandoned warehouse, Chicago

SWIISSH!

Kali Prasad took in a deep breath as her torturer pulled her head out of the toilet. The fifteen-year-old redhead smirked to herself as Kali desperately took in as much air as she could. For a second, she thought she was going to drown in this rinky-dink, worn-out bathroom where no one would find her. The girl stepped back as Kali regained her breath. The distinct *click* of the redhead pulling back the hammer on her pistol could be heard, sending chills down Kali's spine.

"How about it, Eight," the redhead said as she aimed her pistol at the back of Kali's head, "Wanna try some of your Jedi mind tricks on me?"

Kali cursed under her breath. The serum's effects were still active. It was her fault that she let her guard down, giving the redhead the upper hand. One small prick of a hidden hypodermic needle and suddenly, she lost her powers. That was the moment when Kali knew that this attack wasn't random. This redheaded girl targeted her, knew her past, and knew how to take down her entire crew.

My crew. Kali gritted in her teeth in anger as she remembered what happened a few minutes earlier. Axel, Mick, Funshine, and Dottie...all gunned down like they were nothing. The redhead was precise, not wasting a single round of ammunition. It had happened so fast that by the time Kali knew what happened, she would be holding Mick's

lifeless corpse in her arms, yelling that he would be alright when she knew he was already gone. But yet, this assassin kept her alive. The girl had her cornered but she refused to pull the trigger. Kali didn't know if it was good or bad luck that kept her alive.

"I thought so," the redhead said, "Now, Kali Prasad, are you going to tell me what I need to hear?"

"Go find Subject Eleven," the redhead girl had said, "Find her for me. Now tell me you'll find her."

"Go to hell, bitch," Kali spat back. It was the same response she gave when the redhead asked her the same thing earlier. The redhead shook her head and punched Kali right on the chin, nearly knocking her out. She then kicked the bathroom stall door open and dragged Kali out by her hair, simultaneously making sure that Kali couldn't fight back. Kali tried scratching away at the redhead's wrists but nothing seemed to work.

The redhead dragged Kali out back to the main area of the warehouse, where the bodies of her former crew lay. The blood was still fresh. Kali could only look away in disgust. Amused by her reaction, the redhead kicked Kali to the ground and held her at gunpoint. She promised that she wouldn't cry but upon seeing her dead friends, Kali forced away the tears that threatened to betray her. It was too much in such a short amount of time.

"I know you don't know me," the redhead said, "But now you know what I'm capable of. I may be young and small but put a gun in my hands and I'm as good as any Navy SEAL. Now I'm running out of patience, Miss Prasad. Tell me what I need to hear so I can move on with my life. Tell me you will find Jane Ives."

"You're not finding Jane. I won't let you. I won't tell you where she lives so you may as well just kill me right now. You came here for nothing, you hear me!? Nothing!" Kali was about to die. She knew it. But if she could do one thing before she die, it would be protecting Jane's life from this psycho. The redhead sighed and knelt down, her face uncomfortably close to Kali's.

"I already know where Jane lives," the redhead said.

What? But she spent this past hour asking me to find her! What the hell was all this for then!?

"I know that she goes by Jane Hopper now," the redhead continued, "I know she is about to start Hawkins High School in the fall. I know she has a boyfriend, Michael Wheeler. I know she has a quote unquote 'father', James Hopper. I know that she likes Eggo waffles and that she spent a day with you and your formerly living crew. You really think I would go to a low-life, piece of shit like yourself just to figure out where she lives? What do you think of me?"

"Then what...why did you do this then!? Why did you kill my friends, why did you-"

The redhead raised her pistol and aimed it right between Kali's eyes. Kali gulped, terrified of what was to come.

"I want you to find her. I want you to tell her that I know who she is, what she's done, and what she's brought upon her circle of friends. I want her to know that I can take her down and that her mind powers won't do her any good, like what I did to you. Tell her that **Kira Bartlett** is coming for her. Tell her that I want her to know that the moment she opened the gate and let those monsters out, she sealed her fate. Also, Kali, tell her that if she doesn't run...her boyfriend, her father, all her little friends, and anyone who had anything to do with her will be as dead as your skeleton crew."

The redhead pushed the hammer back of her pistol and placed it back in her holster. She stood up and, as she walked away, she said, "You have until the end of summer to warn her ass. And, if you even think about warning anyone else about what I did, if you even attempt to bring in outside help...remember what I did to your friends. I've taken down bigger, more deadlier gangs than yours. And trust me, I'd hate to kill a few strangers for nothing."

The redhead exited the warehouse and left Kali's sight. Without a second to waste, Kali stood up and ran to find the nearest bus. Jane needed to know what was about to go down.

Date: October 1981 (three years prior to her moving to Hawkins)

OFFICER: State your name for the camera.

MAX: Maxine Melinda Mayfield. I know, my parents got very creative with my name.

OFFICER: When were you born?

MAX: April 16, 1969.

OFFICER: Now, can you-

Redacted

Redacted

Redacted

Redacted

Redacted

OFFICER: -alright Maxine, what can you tell us about Mister Adam Noone?

MAX: Other than he was my neighbor?

OFFICER: You are aware of what he's being called in the media, right?

MAX: ...yeah. The Stockton Strangler. But that's what the media calls him. You should actually interview my neighborhood, we all had another name for him.

OFFICER: What was it, can you tell us so we can have it on camera?

MAX: ...**Mr. No One**. Trust me when I say, you don't want this guy out. You want to lock him up in the deepest, darkest basement, and throw the key.

OFFICER: That won't be necessary. We're fully aware of just how

dangerous he is. I can't tell you where he is right now but let's just say he won't be getting out any time soon.

MAX: That's what Ginger said before he got her. He doesn't stop. I don't think he knows how to. I've only met him once, and that was before the killings. But there was something vacant in his eyes. Something was missing there. It felt unnatural, like I was staring into...staring into...

OFFICER: Staring into the eyes of a madman?

MAX: No...staring into the eyes and seeing nothing but pure evil.

FBI WANTED POSTER (one year after Max's testimony)

NAME: Adam Frederick Noone

AGE: 30

GENDER: Male

OCCUPATION: None

APPEARANCE: Caucasian, wavy blond hair, has a noticeable scar on his right eye, and has heterochromia in which his left eye is green and his right eye is blue

ALIASES: The Stockton Strangler, Mr. No One

REWARD: Up to \$200,000

CRIMES: Mr. Noone is wanted for eight counts of first degree murder, two counts of arson, and five counts of attempted murder

DESCRIPTION ON THE POSTER: While transferring Mr. Noone to ADX Florence, the bus he was on got involved in a freak, highway accident. In the chaos, Mr. Noone managed to escape. His current whereabouts are unknown but we have reason to believe he is going further into the Midwest.

WARNING: This man should be considered armed and extremely dangerous. If you see him, avoid contact. If possible, contact authorities but do not in any way, shape, or form engage this individual.

Notes for the Chapter:

First chapter down! Forgive these first few chapters, I have to get through a lot of character and world building. Don't wanna rush the danger. Also, I know I started with the original characters but it felt natural to start this way. Don't worry, we'll see our regular characters next chapter.

Some thoughts

1) Keeping with the spirit of the show, Mr. No One is another 80s archetype. The horror movie serial killer. Characters like Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, and so on.

2) Kali's crew were wiped out pretty early to establish Kira Bartlett as a threat. While it sucks that her crew were killed in the very first chapter, I felt that it was necessary for the plot. With the arc I have in mind for Kira, it wouldn't make sense for her to enter the scene and keep the whole crew alive. Besides, Kali is the one we care about anyways, right? Anyways, sorry for those early deaths. They won't be in vain, I promise.

Anyways, if you want, please leave a kudos and a comment, any feedback is welcome!

2. Normal Things

Summary for the Chapter:

As summer ends, we catch up on the lives of the Hawkins AV club who have had nearly a whole year's worth of normalcy...

LAB TECHNICIAN: Your belief that these girls won't turn against you is misplaced, Dr. Brenner. What do you think will happen once Eleven and Eight find out about what you did to their mothers? To their fathers?

BRENNER: We are prepared for the worst case scenarios-

LAB TECHNICIAN: A couple of soldiers guarding the exits won't matter. You saw what Eleven can do. You send a whole platoon after her, I guarantee that they'll all be in body bags at the end of the mission. And for Eight, the platoon wouldn't even know what they're shooting at. She could play mind games with them the whole night. And that's not even considering the dozens of other girls you have locked away-

BRENNER: You don't think I've prepared for this exact situation? You don't think I have a plan set in case one of our test subjects goes rogue?

LAB TECHNICIAN: If I knew that you had a backup plan in place, I wouldn't be questioning you, right?

BRENNER: Don't worry your little head over trivial matters. I do have a backup plan in place. And once they've finished their training...you'll never have to worry about losing control of our test subjects.

LAB TECHNICIAN: Why?

BRENNER: Because they'll be too scared to rebel once they know what the consequences are.

MIKE

Location: Hawkin's Arcade (The Palace)

Date: Last week of July

Time: Night

"Son of a bitch!"

Mike, Jane, and Will couldn't help but laugh as Max defeated Dustin at a game of table hockey. The score was close but after one massive slip-up, Dustin lost the lead with a well-timed shot from Max. Dustin, who was covered in sweat from trying to keep up with Max, nearly threw the puck into the garbage in rage. Instead, he stress-ate through the last of his nachos in order to cool down. Max had let out a loud "Wa-Hoo!" at the shot, which was well-earned in Mike's opinion. She even high-fived Jane, who congratulated her on the win. Even though their rivalry had died down over the past few months, it still felt strange seeing Jane and Max act as friends. From not being able to even be in the same room as each other to giving each other hugs and high-fives, the boys agreed that it was a change for the best.

Dustin threw the empty nacho box in the garbage and stomped his way back to the hockey table. "Not fair," Dustin pouted, "El left her drink on my side so my hand slipped on the ice juice."

"You mean water," Mike sassed back, "You know, that substance that's left when your ice melts? And it's Jane! How many times do we have to tell you?"

"Sorry, Jane. I can't get used to saying that."

Well you better or else her dad will kick your ass. Jane Hopper, ignoring the slip-up in her name, playfully nudged Mike in the ribs before saying, "It's okay. You can call me El. That was the name you gave me."

"That I gave you," Mike corrected, immediately feeling stupid that he had to clarify. Luckily, Jane didn't mind and simply just nudged him in the ribs again.

"Hey, I just realized we never took a vote on this," Lucas suddenly

chimed up. He put his hot dog down and cleared his throat. "I know that Jane is what the government wants to call you but we knew you as El! So I think that, at least among us, we don't have to follow what the government says if it's too weird to call you 'Jane'. Now, who wants to keep using the name 'El', raise your hands."

At that, Mike had to step in. *I guess this is what boyfriends have to do. Or at least, this feels like something a boyfriend should do.* "Guys, we have an official birth certificate. It's Jane Hopper, case closed! That's what Sheriff Hopper wants her to be called. Besides, we don't wanna piss the government off again. I mean, what if someone makes the connection that 'El' means 'Eleven'?"

"I highly doubt that'll happen," Dustin said as he wiped the table, "What, you think they have microphones and hidden cameras all around Hawkins?"

"They did! And who knows, they still might have some lying around!"

"The government has better things to do than keep watch on us! The gate's gone, Brenner's gone, and Will hasn't had an episode in months! Like...I don't know. They should be more focused on stopping Communism or something."

"You're being really short-sighted, Dustin. I don't think we should-"

Will let out a fake cough, catching Mike's attention. He pointed to Jane, who had crossed her arms. She didn't look too happy from the looks of it. On instinct, Mike pulled her in, not going for a hug since she was closing herself off. She was upset and he felt responsible. He mentally cursed himself for arguing about the government, knowing how she felt about them and her past.

"Sorry about that, Jane," Mike said, "I just got caught up-"

"-It's okay," she said, forcing out a smile. Suddenly realizing where they were, Jane looked at the others and waved them off. "Let's go back to the game, alright? I'm sorry if I made this awkward."

As soon as she said that, a whole cascade of variations of 'no, it's fine,

it's not your fault' started coming out from each member of the group. Mike elected to stay out of it, knowing that he already had a lot to discuss with her that night. He could afford to save his words.

Mike was afraid of this. It was the last week of summer and Mike knew just how excited Jane was at the idea of starting high school with the group. Since she couldn't leave her cabin, she had spent every day studying in order to be able to pass as a student at a high school level. To her credit, she was a fast learner. Maybe a little too fast. Jonathan, Nancy, and Steve, who had elected to tutor her, even mentioned how surprised they were at how quickly she was going through their lessons. Nancy even remarked that she could be a prodigy.

Was it because of her powers that her mind can easily absorb all this new information? Does she have more mind powers than just being able to move stuff around? Maybe Brenner did something to her that allows her to take in all this information at such a quick pace? But if that's true, then why? Maybe it was to deduce Russian codes? Goddammit Mike, you're overthinking all of this!

Mike had all these questions but really, his main concern wasn't about how Jane could learn so fast but rather if she could fit in at Hawkins High. It was one thing to be able to pass off as a regular student, it was another thing to have to actually experience that life. And in Mike's mind, she was starting her new life in the worst possible way. His AV Club were already at the bottom of the popularity scale. Would Jane become a target of all this bullying as well? Could she handle it? Mike had a feeling that she could since she had endured worse situations but then another thought came to mind;

What if the complete opposite happened? What if she's embraced by the school? What if she makes better, more interesting friends? What if she finds someone else-

Mike is pulled out of his gaze when Will taps on his shoulder. "You okay there, bud?" Will asked. *I could be better.*

"I'm fine, man," Mike said, "Just thinking about a lot of stuff."

"Well, we're going to get a table and buy some pizza. You kinda just zoned out there."

"Yeah. Guess I overthought."

"Well, try not to zone out on us anymore. Don't pull a 'me'."

Mike and Will laughed at that. It was tasteless but since it came from Will, Mike didn't feel too guilty laughing at the joke. The humor helped with dealing with all the traumatic events that happened last year. It didn't erase any of the bad memories but it at least helped them cope.

The two then walked over to the table where the rest of the group was sitting and sat down, Mike sitting next to Jane and Will sitting next to Dustin. The six ate and joked around, mainly passing stories to Jane since she couldn't play with them the whole summer. They were able to visit her cabin but beyond that, she had missed out on most of the group's summer adventures.

The tales ranged from Dustin having a crush on Elsa Banning, the most popular girl at school and the head cheerleader, Will's awkward encounter with another new girl who he thought was Max's sister since she was also a redhead, Max staying with the Wheelers since her parents had to fly back to California for a few days and Billy was out of state on a road trip, and Lucas wandering around the construction site of a mansion being built in Hawkins. Most of the stories were mundane and on occasion, a story would pop out to Jane. It was the mansion story, though, that completely got her attention.

Well, of course it would. A mansion? Here, in Hawkins? This isn't Beverly Hills, for God's sake!

"Really, a mansion?" Jane had asked. She then compared the mansion to the mansion on her favorite soap opera, 'Dynasty', which made the whole group laugh. That said, Mike didn't feel that she was wrong about asking her question. It was strange that a mansion was being built in Hawkins, of all places. Still, it was not his concern and having a mansion in this random small town was exciting in a way that didn't make him worry about losing his friends. For once, he was glad

that the strangest thing that was happening in Hawkins was just an expensive home being built nearby.

As the night dragged on, the gang decided to try their hand at another new game, Ice Climbers, which Dustin hoped would redeem his failed hockey game. However, Mike decided that it was time. He needed to talk to Jane about the upcoming school year. So, as the gang started playing, he let out a fake cough and said, "Um, you guys go ahead, I gotta talk to Jane about something."

"Talk?" Jane asked, raising her eyebrows.

"It's okay, I promise. I just wanna talk in private."

"Oh, I see what's happening here," Dustin said with a suggestive grin. Mike rolled his eyes as Dustin made kissing noises. Lucas and Max joined in while Will laughed, amused at what was happening. Jane blushed but was still confused.

"Nothing like that!" Mike blurted out, "Serious stuff!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, sure," Max said, "We'll still be here, you two have your talk. And in case you were lying about 'talking'...Jane, you should put on some lipstick. That way, we'll know."

Dustin, Lucas, and Will burst out laughing as Jane's red blush went even redder in response. *Ladies and gentlemen...my friends. Well, my soon-to-be-ex-friends.* Mike stuck his tongue out at the group as he took Jane by the hand and walked her outside of the Palace. He ignored the butterflies in his stomach as he held her hand. It's been a year and he still gets nervous around her. Then again, that's what Jonathan and Steve had told him about when he asked what to expect in a relationship.

"You'll always get the jitters," Jonathan had said while Steve had said, "It's like you want to barf but you can't at the same time. Sorry, that was an awful metaphor." The fact that they were both thinking about Nancy when they were giving him advice didn't escape him.

Now outside, Mike led Jane to a small bench and sat down, patting the seat next to him signalling for her to sit as well. She did and

turned to him, still confused.

"Okay, what do you want to talk about?" Jane asked. Mike lost his train of thought for a second. He knew that she was being tutored but her English really had improved immensely. It was only two years ago that she couldn't even talk in complete sentences. She didn't even know what 'friend' and 'promise' meant.

"Just some stuff," Mike said lamely, "How does it feel? To be outside of the cabin?" Mike hoped that the question wasn't too invasive. Thankfully, she just relaxed in her seat, pondering the question.

"It's nice," Jane said, "I mean, isn't that what all of us want?"

"It is. I just wanted to know how you were feeling. You know, about being normal with the rest of us. And going to school. That's going to be strange but...how do you think it'll go? Are you scared about going to school with us?"

Jane paused. She then said, "I am scared. It's a new thing. But I think it will be fine. I might face bullies but I have you and the others."

"But we won't be there for you all the time."

"I know. That's fine. I can take care of myself. Remember, Chicago?"

Mike smiled at that. "Yeah, I remember." It felt like he was watching an action movie when Jane described her adventures with Kali and her crew. He pitied the idiot who tried to bully her. But as he thought about it, the more he realized that Jane had one way of dealing with her enemies. Could she handle the bullies without using her powers? Without killing them? Could she handle her problems like a normal girl?

"You know you can't do what you do at school, right?" Mike said, "Handling monsters and cops is one thing but these are just...other students. You can't use your powers."

"I know. I'm trying to get used to that. That's why I'm using them less. I want to not rely on my powers all the time. And maybe...maybe one day I might get my wish."

"What's your wish?"

Jane took a deep breath, as if to emphasize her answer. Without hesitation, she said, "To not have powers."

Mike already knew that but hearing it from her still threw him off. Dustin, Lucas, Max, and even Will might not be able to understand her but Mike understood. She just wants to be normal. He figured that was the case ever since he saw how uncomfortable she looked when Dustin asked her to raise his Millennium Falcon. Maybe her powers were 'cool' to them. Maybe the group thought her powers made her 'cool'. But to Jane, it was a curse, a reminder of where she came from. A reminder of the man she once called 'Papa' and of the lab, where she literally split a hole in reality and unleashed terror on Hawkins. Perhaps it wasn't so bad just being normal.

"I just want to fit in with everyone here," Jane said, "Do normal girl things. Live a normal life. Have normal problems. I don't like excitement, I like the boredom."

"But you know, if you lost your powers, then you would actually have to lift stuff with your arms," Mike joked. Jane smiled at that.

"That's fine. Lifting stuff is good exercise. That's what dad said when he was getting boxes from the basement."

"I guess."

"You should lift more stuff." Jane playfully pinched Mike's arms and he retreated, feigning the pain. "Your arms are so scrawny! They're like bones!"

"Wow, way to make me feel unmanly. If you want someone with beefy arms, maybe you should date Barry Cooper."

"Who's Barry Cooper?"

"Oh, right. You don't know anyone outside of our group. He's Hawkins High's star quarterback, I have him in my chemistry class, and he's got huge, beefy arms. I don't think he's your type, though, he's more of a pancake person."

"That's okay. And I didn't mean what I said. Your arms are fine. They're the right amount of muscle."

Mike laughed at that and then placed his arm around Jane's shoulders, gently pulling her in. She in turn rested her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his hips. Mike hoped to God that she couldn't hear his heart beating at the moment. He felt his whole face go red from how hard he was blushing.

Silence. Mike and Jane sat there, taking in the nighttime atmosphere. They watched as fireflies began flying around, lighting up the sky as they did. Jane then raised her head and said, "Everything will be different again."

"Yeah," Mike said, "You'll be out in the world, going to school with all of us. Sheriff Hopper-er, I mean your dad, will have to explain that he has a new daughter. I think we all have to tell Mr. Clarke that we're not related and you're not from Sweden."

"That's okay, I like this change. It's not sad, this time. No one is hurt or in danger."

"Yeah, I suppose that's right. Well, actually, it's not 100% happy. Now you have to go through school with us. Prepare to hate cliques, bullies, exams and homework."

"Compromise."

"What?"

"Dad taught me. Half-way happy."

"Ah, I see."

Another few minutes pass. Just as Jane was about to fall asleep, Will stepped out of the arcade. He walked over to them, sipping his drink steadily as he did.

"There you two are," he said, "Lucas, Max, and Dustin are wrapping up, we're gonna head out."

"Oh, already?" Mike said. *Oops, should've paid closer attention to the*

time. "Come on, Jane, we gotta go."

"Sorry, Will," Jane groggily said.

Will waved her off. "That's alright, you two were having your little talk. Unlike the others, I wanna be respectful of you two."

"I appreciate that," Mike said. He and Jane stood up, stretching as they did since they had been sitting on the bench for some time now. The trio then entered the arcade, where Max, Lucas, and Dustin had already cleaned up. Before Mike could lead the way out, the Palace employee Keith blocked the way. The group (minus Jane) groaned at the man as he dug into his bag of Cheetos, making sure they heard each crunch.

"Move out of the way, Keith," Mike said.

Keith refused and bit down on another Cheeto. "Just wait a second there, you...six? Oh, hello new girl."

"Hello," Jane said, awkwardly waving her hand.

Keith waved back with his Cheeto hand. "What was I gonna say again-oh, that's right! You six-"

"-you're not getting a date with my sister," Mike spat out, "You're never getting a date with her and there's no way in hell you're getting one now since she's dating Jonathan Byers." It was late and most of his annoyance was coming from his need for sleep.

"I wasn't gonna say that, Wheeler. What I was gonna say is that construction on the new mansion down by Mirkwood and Cornwallis has finished. The family moving in there invited the whole town to visit and my boss promised me a bonus check if I told people that. Oh, and here's the invitation."

Keith pulled a pamphlet from the front lobby table and handed it to the group. Max snatched it and opened the pamphlet. Inside was a picture of the finished mansion (Lucas: "Wow, it looks like it was ripped right from Hollywood"), as well as a picture of the family. There were three of them; two of them, one man and one woman, were middle-aged, possibly around their forties or fifties, and the

third one was a girl their age. The family was of Chinese descent and while the two, middle-aged people were smiling, the young girl was frowning, almost looking away from the camera.

Below the family was a greeting which read, "The Huang family (Adam Huang, Andrea Huang, and **Nina Huang**) invites the entire town of Hawkins, Indiana for a special meet-and-greet, housewarming event". The date listed was the second day of school and below the greeting was an odd symbol. It looked like a lion's head with several rings around it. The image freaked the group out, with even Jane looking uncomfortable at the mere sight of it.

"Alright, y'all got a good look at the picture," Keith said as he pulled out a clipboard from the same table, "Now sign here so I can show my boss that I actually did my job."

The group signed the clipboard and headed out. Thinking nothing of it, Max threw the invitation into the nearest garbage can she could find. As the group sped away from the Palace, the six of them tried to push away any thoughts of the creepy invitation and of the weird symbol that unnerved them all. But something was telling them that this won't be the last time they would encounter this mysterious family that just moved to Hawkins.

KALI

Location: Unknown

Date: First week of June

Time: Unknown

SWOOSH

Kali Prasad immediately awoken and began panting heavily. The water was freezing cold and the splash had taken the wind right out of her. As she adjusted, she began to assess her situation. She couldn't move. There was a bright light shining on her face, making it hard to see anything. Just by jiggling her wrists and feet though, she could

sense that she was sitting down and restrained by something. Everything else was still there, except for...*her powers*. The feeling she had when Kira Bartlett took her powers away was back, only this time, she didn't know where it came from. That thought just on its own terrified her.

As she started to panic, she heard footsteps move behind her. Kali cursed the lights since it was completely blinding, to the point that she couldn't even get a good look at the room she was in.

"Time to wake up, little girl".

A voice all of a sudden. Kali sat up, hoping to reach out to anyone.

"Where...where...where am I?" Kali said, genuinely terrified. She couldn't be here now, she needed to find Jane.

There was the distinct sound of metal scraping on metal before that same voice said, "You're with me. No need to run. You're safe."

"No...I have to get to Jane. You can't keep me here, she needs to know that she's in danger!"

"Don't you worry your pretty little head. Such a pretty one you are, who hurt you? You have all these scars on you. And...you don't have to worry about your friends anymore...because I'm the only friend you'll ever need."

Who the hell is this guy!? "Who are you?"

At that, the man with the mysterious voice stepped into the light. Kali still couldn't see his face but she could make out the resemblance of scarred facial skin and an oversized stethoscope around his neck. The stranger then said, "Barbara, don't you recognize me? It's me, your husband! That's okay. You'll remember me soon, Barbara.

"What are you talking about, I'm not Barbara."

"Oh I know...but you will be. You need to be. Because you know what happens to girls who refuse to be my Barbara? They meet Mr. No One. And trust me, no one wants that."

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry if it's a little annoying that I'm sticking with "Jane Hopper". Honestly, it doesn't make sense to me to have the characters refer to her as "El" or "Eleven" when she has a legal name.

As always, if you want, leave a comment and a kudos! Any feedback is more than welcome!

3. New Girls

Summary for the Chapter:

As the first day of school approaches, Will Byers and Dustin Henderson befriend two new girls who have arrived at Hawkins. Meanwhile, Karen Wheeler and Steve Harrington make decisions that will affect the rest of their lives...

WILL

Date: August 1985, a few days before school starts

Time: Morning

Location: Castle Byers

"Promise not to freak out?"

Will Byers huffed as Max dragged him out to Castle Byers. He hadn't visited the fort for months. Since the incident with the Demogorgon, he had become hesitant to approach it. The fort was just wood and sheets but he couldn't help but picture the monsters from the Upside Down stalking it, which was the main reason why he maintained his distance. So it was surprising when early in the morning, Max Mayfield had arrived at his house and told him to follow her to Castle Byers. He had just poured milk into his cereal, which he suspected was soggy by now.

"You haven't told me anything, Max," Will said, pulling his arm away from her. Max turned to face him directly, slightly annoyed.

"Alright, you want the long version or short version?"

"Long version, I guess."

"Okay, so I got up this morning and realized my breath stank from eating fried onions-"

"-I changed my mind. Short version."

"Aw, I'll tell you that story later then. Here's the short version. So I was touring Hawkins since that's what I do on my off days. While at the Radio Shack, I think to myself that I should visit Mirkwood! I don't really visit that side of town and I could see the new mansion! So I go over and then...well, see for yourself."

What the hell is this girl going on about? Will watched as Max pulled back the curtains on the fort. He had to give it to Max, she was not lying when she told him that he needed to see this.

It was the same girl from the pamphlet that Keith showed them the previous night. She looked exactly like her picture, except instead of the long, black hair she had, it was now a very short, pixie haircut. *Nina Huang? Nina? I think that was her name.* The Asian girl shifted from where she was sitting, surprised to see Will and Max. Immediately she rolled up her sleeves and tucked her arms away, as if she was ashamed that they may have saw her arms. Will was not sure why that would be something she would be concerned with but he decided not to pursue that thought.

"Hello," Will said, awkwardly. He waved at the girl, who awkwardly waved back. She shifted again, not sure what position was comfortable.

"Hey there," Max followed up, "Can you tell us why you're here, in Will's fort?" Nina didn't respond.

Just as Will was about to ask her the same question, Nina said, "It's quiet here." Her voice was soft and gentle. Will looked at Max, suddenly feeling worried for the girl. Something just didn't feel right about this situation. From the way she sounded to how conscious she was of herself, she was giving off the impression that she was not in the best mental state. Deciding to dig deeper, Will stepped into the fort, sitting right across from Nina. Max elected to stay outside but kept looking in.

"You know you can't be here, right?" Will asked, trying his best not to sound too aggressive, "You can't just sneak onto other people's property-"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. It's just...I needed to step away. I needed the space. This was the only place I could find."

"Step away from what? Bullies? Police?"

"I don't know if I'm comfortable answering that."

"Try me. I'm not always the cheeriest person but you can talk to me. I won't judge."

The girl sighed as she rubbed her arms. "Fine. If you wanna know...it's my parents."

Uh oh. Now I KNOW I'm in an area I shouldn't be. Will gulped loudly, immediately regretting his response since he just promised not to judge her. He turned to Max who simply shrugged, unsure how to respond as well.

"Told you, you don't wanna know," Nina said.

"No, it's totally fine!" Will said, "I don't get along with my dad so I can kinda relate."

"Same here," Max said, "I don't even call him 'dad'. It's just Neil Hargrove to me."

Nina's face softened at Will and Max's admissions. *Now we're getting somewhere.* "I appreciate the words. I'm sorry, that's a bit much to say. It's just...you ever have a moment where you can't believe how stupid the other person is? That your only response is to get away from them? Like, you don't even have the energy to tell them that they're stupid or that they're wrong. You just need to leave."

Will pondered her question. A few people came to mind. "Yeah. I already mentioned my dad. And then there's Troy, definitely. I don't think you ever met him since you're new here but he was a bully. Called all of us bad names and stuff. It was best just to stay away from him."

"Yeah. That's good to hear. I had a 'Troy' back at my other school, although in my case, her name was 'Beverly'. And she didn't call me bad names but she did like to write nasty stuff about me and the

other girls at school-

"-Look, I'm sorry if me asking is rude, but I never got your name." Will already knew but it was the only question he could think of that could possibly steer this conversation into more comfortable conversation topics.

The girl's eyes lit up as soon as she heard this. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I never said it. I'm Nina. Nina Huang. And you're...Will?"

"William Byers, but you can call me Will. And this is my friend, Maxine Mayfield, but you really should just call her Max."

"Howdy." Max said with a grin.

"Nice to meet you two," Nina said, "You probably already know my name though. You've seen those pamphlets, right? The ones about the mansion down the street?"

Will nodded, thinking back to Keith. "Yeah, we saw them at the arcade. Your family had that built here and everything."

"It's tacky as hell, right? I mean, it's a mansion in the middle of a small town. My parents are too used to living around other rich people that they couldn't just buy a home here. It's stupid."

"Well, I mean, if you have the money, then why not build?"

Nina glared at Will, which made him cringe. He wasn't sure what he said but now, she was upset. *Oh, that's right. She ran here to get AWAY from her parents. And I just sided with them. Way to go, William Byers, you just pissed the new, rich girl off.*

"But yeah, it is very tacky," Will said, trying to salvage the situation.

"Extremely tacky," Max added, "Complete eye sore, makes me want to vomit."

Silence. As the minutes passed, Will realized that Nina had retreated back into herself. She was no longer looking at him or Max and seemed more annoyed at their presence. Will wanted to leave but he couldn't just leave her here. At the very least, she couldn't stay. *If she*

wants to mope, she has to do it somewhere else.

Will cleared his throat, not sure how to begin. He brushed away some leaves that were near his feet, trying to find the words. "Um," Will started, "Sorry to have to do this but you're gonna have to move on soon. You can't just be here, you're on my family's property."

Nina nodded. Will sighed in relief, happy that she was still with him. "I know. I just needed a place to rest for a while. I won't be here long. Besides, your fort is really uncomfortable. How do you sit in here?"

"Trust me, that never goes away." Will laughed, thinking back to all the times that he and the other AV Club members complained about how Castle Byers needed an actual floor to sit on.

"If you want, I can ask my parents to renovate this place," Nina continued, "I mean, they paid for all the construction on the mansion. It wouldn't cost too much. Plus, we can add a TV and pinball machine or something. I don't know, I'm just tossing ideas out there."

"Nah, it's alright. I like that the fort isn't too fancy. It gives it its own...aesthetic? Is that the word?"

"Vintage?" Max said, hoping that was the right word.

"No, William is correct," Nina interjected, "He has a point though. There's a certain rustic aesthetic to this fort."

Rustic? "Does rustic mean 'super cool'?" Will said jokingly. Catching both him and Max by surprise, the girl chuckled.

"No, rustic does not mean cool, ya dummy," Nina said playfully, "It just means rural. Plain. Doesn't that describe this fort, with the walls being made of pieces of wood around the area, the floor being covered in leaves, and it being built right in the middle of a forest. I can close my eyes and just visualize the fort from a distance, with all the trees swaying in the background. I can even smell the fresh, cold air and hear the birds chirping as the leaves are swept away by a gust of wind. It's like it was taken right from a painting from the Romantic period. I'm not sure what emotion it is but there's just something...grand...calming...peaceful about it."

Will could only watch as the girl went into her own little world. Truthfully, Castle Byers was just another fort to him. It was a big deal to just create it with Jonathan and it was a huge part of his childhood. But he was going into high school now. The fort felt like a relic of the past, a time in his life when things were 'normal'. Hearing this girl talk about it made the fort feel even more significant than what it actually was. He was almost touched by how beautifully she described Castle Byers.

"I think you might be overanalyzing this fort," Max said with a grin on her face. *Way to kill the mood, Mayfield.* Thankfully, Nina didn't seem to take offense.

"Well...I thought that was beautiful," Will snapped back, a grin also on his face. Max stuck her tongue out at him and Will waved her off. The two of them didn't really hang out but Will couldn't deny that she was fun to be around. Even when she was trying to be a pain in the ass.

"I'm glad," Nina spoke up, "Before I moved, my family owned a bunch of paintings. I mean, we still do, but they haven't arrived yet. When I was six, I asked about them and my parents would tell me the histories of each painting in great detail. I think that's what got me into drawing as well."

Will's eyes lit up at her saying that. "You draw?"

Nina shyly smiled. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a napkin. "I drew this in the morning, while I was exploring Hawkins. I saw him at the diner with his girlfriend so I thought I'd try my hand at drawing the scene. It's not my best but here, take a look."

Will couldn't believe it. It was a drawing of Jonathan and Nancy, their faces locked in a state of laughing. The drawing wasn't perfect since Will could see the pencil smudges but the artwork still blew him away. It almost looked professional.

"This is my brother and Nancy Wheeler," Will said, handing back the napkin, "You're amazing!"

"Really? You think so?"

"Absolutely! I draw too but I'm nowhere near as good as you!"

"You draw too?"

"Yeah! I can show you my drawings, if you want. Obviously, I don't have them on me but maybe when school starts, I could bring you my book!"

Nina held a neutral face at that. Will wasn't sure if she was down with the idea or if she was going to reject him on the spot. Before he could say that she could politely turn down his offer, Nina said, "I'd like that. If you want, you can bring your book to my place."

Will looked at Max, who had the same surprised expression on her face. He then turned back to Nina. "Really? The mansion? We're allowed to visit?"

"I mean, it's just a really big house. Yeah, I'll tell the security team to let you and your friends in-"

"-you have a security team!?" Max interjected, "I mean, of course you do."

Well, it's nice to make a new friend. And also, she draws! It's nice to finally be able to bond with someone over a hobby! "Sure, I'd love to come by. Maybe we can have a little drawing session."

"I'd like that, William." Nina paused. After a full minute, she then said, "I hope you don't mind but I'd like to stay for a few more minutes. I promise I'll leave but I really wanna be alone right now, if that's okay with you."

"You promise you'll go?"

"Promise."

Great, now I'm Mike. Screw it, it's not like he has a copyright on the word 'promise'. Will nodded his head and he stood up and exited the fort. He waved one last goodbye to Nina before he and Max walked back home.

On the way back, Will noticed that Max was grinning at him.

Annoyed, he lightly nudged her on the arm. "What's with that look," Will asked.

"We just befriended the rich girl," Max said smugly, "Does that mean we're popular now?"

"No. She's rich but she's new. You can't just buy popularity."

"Whatever you say Will. She may be new...but she's rich."

"You just flipped the words around-"

"-whatever Byers."

Will nodded his head, waving her off as she did. As they approached the front door, Will couldn't get Nina out of his head. Although he was excited to make a new friend, he couldn't help but wonder if he had made a mistake in accepting her invitation. Sure, she described the mansion as just 'a big house' but he thought back to the night where Keith showed them the pamphlets. The weird lion symbol that gave him chills for some reason.

Should I have asked her about it? No, that's too private. She'd probably not want to talk about it-

"Do you think we should've asked her about the weird lion symbol?" Max asked, unaware that Will was thinking the same thing.

"Maybe. But it's too soon. Let's be respectful and get to know her first before asking stuff like that."

"But still, that picture creeped you out too, right? It's not just me?"

"No, Max, it's not just you. Don't worry, once we get to know Nina better, then we'll ask."

"...do you think it'll be nothing? That the lion symbol is just some picture she drew? I actually have this ongoing bet with Lucas and Jane on what the symbol could mean. Lucas thinks the Huangs are part of a top secret government organization and Jane thinks it's their family crest and that they have some cool warrior ancestors or something."

"What do you think, Max?"

"I think they're part of some weird cult that worships the lion symbol. Like that movie that came out last year, 'Children of the Corn'. That lion is 'He Who Walks Behind the Rows'!"

Will rolled his eyes. "First off, that movie sucked! Second, all of the strange stuff that happened in Hawkins ended when Jane closed the gate. Look, there probably is some weird history with the Huang family. But I'm pretty sure it's nothing to worry about."

DUSTIN

Date: A few days before school starts

Time: Afternoon

Location: Hawkins Arcade (The Palace)

"There she is again."

Lucas pointed out the girl again. Dustin turned and saw her. The girl with the long, curly red hair who Will had bumped into. She was playing a game of pinball by herself and from the looks of it, she was really getting into the game.

Wow, this is deja vu. It's me and Lucas semi-stalking the new girl who just happens to be a redhead. I mean, what are the odds that we'd be doing this again just a year after Max arrived? However, Dustin couldn't help but feel that there was something...off about this new girl. Even though this situation felt familiar, she wasn't like Max at all. While Max at least seemed like someone they wanted to get to know better, this new girl seemed cold and a bit hostile.

The rumors surrounding her were going around Hawkins at an alarming rate. Mike Wheeler had told them a story he heard from Jennifer Hayes, about how the new girl smoked behind the Radio Shack and that she stole her cigarettes from the Dogs of Hell biker gang.

Dustin had of course asked, 'What the hell are the Dogs of Hell' and Mike told them a long-winded story about how this girl may have fought an entire gang in the town of Heald, Indiana, which was only a few miles from Hawkins.

"So the story goes that one the bikers tried to cut her hair," Mike had said, "Why? I don't know. Point is, the girl went nuts and she killed every single one of them. And the story might even be true since that gang doesn't exist in Heald anymore! I even checked the newspaper!"

"That's badass," Max had said when she heard the story, "Dustin, go and bring her into the group. Jane and I need more female friends and you're fun to talk to."

"Yes," Jane had said cheerfully, "Bring the new girl in! She sounds very interesting!"

Unlike Max and El, Dustin didn't believe the stories. A girl their age taking down an entire biker gang? Not possible. But when Dustin asked Mike how that story began circulating, his response sent shivers down his spine.

"Well, Jennifer had asked the new girl to stop smoking," Mike had said, "The new girl got offended, pulled out a knife, and held it under her chin. The new girl then said that she knows what it's like to slice a man's throat open and that if she wants to keep her neck, she should mind her own business. Jennifer being Jennifer then did some research on her and found out that the day the new girl left Heald, the Dogs of Hell had disappeared completely. Jen hasn't even been around the new girl ever since."

"Dustin, wanna talk to her?" Lucas asked, snapping him out of his daydream. Dustin immediately refused, shaking his head as he bit down into his hot dog.

"Nope, unlike Jennifer and Mike, I actually care about living," Dustin said, "I'm sensing a lot of bad vibes from that girl, okay. So no, I'm not risking it."

"Maybe she just needs a friend. I mean, she's new here-"

"-she threatened to cut Jennifer Hayes' throat!"

"Jennifer could've been lying! Remember how she spread the rumor that El-I mean Jane's mom was Joyce Byers? She could've been lying to Mike!"

"I don't know, man, I just don't think it's a good idea to approach the girl. Maybe if the whole group was here, then I'd feel a little more comfortable."

Lucas sighed, putting his hands up in defeat. He finished the last of his soda before standing up. "Well, I gotta use the restroom," he said as he walked away, "When I come back, we're playing Dig Dug."

"You're on!" Dustin cheerfully said as he went back to his hot dog. He got so caught up in his food that he didn't notice that the new girl had snuck up behind him.

"Hey."

Dustin almost choked on a piece of meat when he heard the new girl behind him. Her voice was soft and almost inviting but in context with what Dustin knew about her, she might as well have threatened him. She didn't have a knife out but it felt like he was being held at knife point. *Oh god...please be gentle with me.*

"Hi?" Dustin said, his voice cracking and going a bit too high. The girl walked around and sat where Lucas was sitting. "Hey, my friend was sitting there-"

Dustin was cut off as the girl grabbed Dustin's hot dog right from his hands and took a bite. Dustin normally would've argued back but at the same time, he was worried that she would kill him for that slight. Instead of doing something, he said nothing and watched as the girl take a bite into his hot dog.

"New York hot dogs are better," the new girl said as she handed it back to him, "But Indiana hot dogs are pretty good too. Also, you overload yours with onions too. We have something in common."

Ever since he was young, Dustin loved putting onions on his hot dog. He was surprised that he shared that love with a possible sociopath. "We do? Oh, I mean...yeah, I guess."

"Most people I know hate onions but I love the strong taste, you know? Why do you like them?"

"I like the strong taste too. Hot dogs on their own are already pretty good but I like the kick that onions add to the taste. Am I making sense here?"

"You are."

Silence. Minutes felt like hours as the new girl looked right at Dustin, expecting him to say something. Dustin didn't want the conversation to turn awkward but he just couldn't find a way to ease the tension. All he could imagine at the moment was Jennifer Hayes and Mike Wheeler, telling him to run while he had the chance.

Probably sensing the silence, the girl then said, "So you heard the rumors about me, right?"

Well, this is how I die I guess. Not by getting ripped apart by a Demogorgon or a girl with a number tattoo, but by a vigilante high schooler. At least I had one last hot dog before I died.

"Yeah, I did," Dustin said.

"That I killed a biker gang just to get some cigarettes? Or maybe you heard the version of the story where I killed them because they wanted my hair."

"Both versions. And that you threatened to cut Jennifer Hayes' throat for annoying you." The girl chuckled at that, which was just unnerving to watch. To Dustin, every move she made felt like she was one second away from pulling out a knife and stabbing him in the neck.

The girl ate a fry from Lucas' tray. "Right. I just wanna let you know that all those rumors...were 100% true."

SHIT. SHIT. Now I'm dead. DEAD!

"They are?" Dustin asked, too terrified to move. To his surprise, the girl started to chuckle again. He didn't like how she was making light of the entire situation but he was not about to tell her to stop

laughing.

"Yup. That's why, when you go to Heald, you won't find anymore Dogs of Hell bikers. I killed them all." The girl then made a finger pistol and made *pew pew* noises. Although she was trying to be funny, Dustin's back went cold when he realized that she could be telling the truth.

"Hold on," Dustin said, "Are you being for real right now? Because it's really hard to tell if you're just joking or if you're being serious."

"Maybe. Possibly. Insert synonym for 'maybe' here. I mean, they could be fake for all you know. You never know. I can't prove that the rumors are true or false."

"So...why bring them up?"

"Well, I'm new here and I already have a bad reputation. Look, I didn't mean to threaten Jennifer Hayes. It's just, I can be a bit...intense. That's what got me in trouble at my old school. So I'm doing this new thing where I'm only going to be positive from now on. I got into a lot of trouble in the other town I was in so I'm used to dealing with my problems violently. But I'm really trying to break the cycle."

Oh. So she has a heart? Well, that's a relief.

"So, we're good then?" Dustin asked. The girl waved him off, smiling as she did.

"Yes, of course! That's why I'm talking to you. I wanna start fresh with everyone around here, especially with other people my age since school starts in a few days. Sorry if I was scaring you back there. Because seriously, I'm trying to do better. If I can make at least one friend, then I can say I've succeeded in turning over a new leaf. Can I count you as a new friend?"

Well, I didn't expect this at all. "Um...yes. I mean no, I mean...oh god, sorry, I don't wanna offend you but we just met. I like that you're trying but I don't know how to feel about you just yet."

The girl nodded her head. "It's okay, I understand. It's a start. And I

still have a whole year to get to know you and everyone else in Hawkins."

"Well, yeah. That'd be great. That'd be really great."

Dustin smiled at this. He wasn't entirely sure if he still believed the rumors about the girl. But the more he talked to her, the less intimidating she seemed. She just seemed so...normal. If he was being honest, it was a bit of a letdown. Mike and Jennifer had built her up as this supreme badass who could kill you for the slightest insult but meeting her in person completely changed that view. On one hand, he was relieved that she wasn't the terrifying girl that the rumors made her out to be. On the other hand, she became less exciting in his eyes. *Just another girl who moved to Hawkins.*

The girl then flipped her hair back and cracked her neck, closing her eyes in order to fully crank her neck. Dustin almost dropped his hot dog when she flipped her hair since she had unintentionally drew his focus on her face. *Just another girl? Yeah right.* That was the moment he realized that the girl was absolutely gorgeous. Of course, he noticed her looks before and thought that she was pretty. He wasn't blind. But with the rumors surrounding her, he didn't have time to consider his attraction. As soon as he pushed those rumors aside and became comfortable around her presence, that was when he realized just how pretty she was. Maybe he just had a thing for redheaded women. Whatever it was, he knew without a doubt that this girl was insanely gorgeous, in an 'outsider' way. She wasn't attractive like the popular girls at school and she wasn't a supermodel. However, she had a beauty to her that he couldn't describe.

Hmm...maybe this is how Mike sees Eleven. I think I'm starting to get it now.

"You can stop staring, boy," the girl said, saucily. Dustin looked away, his face turning red from embarrassment. He didn't realize he had been staring at her for two full minutes.

"Sorry, sorry," Dustin said, "I didn't realize I was-"

"-I'm not offended. Just admit you think I'm pretty and that's the reason why you were staring. I'd rather people be upfront about their

intentions."

"Okay, fine. I was."

"Good. Then no, I'm not offended. And before your mind goes into that direction again, which it probably will since you're a young man going through puberty, we should at least know each other's names."

Oh right, I never even asked. Stupid! That should've been the first question!

"Okay, what's your name?" Dustin asked.

"Kira. Kira Bartlett. And you?"

"Henderson, Dustin. I mean, Dustin Henderson. Dustin's my first name-"

"-I got it. Don't worry, you're doing fine."

"Sorry, I'm just nervous."

Kira winked at him as she stood from her seat. *Holy shit, she winked at me!*

"I'll see you around, Dustin. Tell your friend that I said hi and that I'd like to be friends. Tell all your friends, actually. I wanna get to know as many people my age as possible."

"I will! And when school starts, you should find me again! I promise, I'll introduce you to the rest of the gang!"

"I'd like that." The girl waved as she walked away, exiting the Palace. As she did, Lucas joined Dustin back at the table. Dustin couldn't help but smile, which Lucas immediately noticed.

"Why you so happy?" Lucas asked.

"Well, I just met the most wonderful person..."

KAREN

Date: A few days before school starts

Time: Night

Location: The Hargrove-Mayfield home

This is stupid!

Karen berated herself as she knocked on the door. Although she dressed up for the occasion, part of her was wishing that she would listen to her gut and back away. This seemed like a bad idea all around but she couldn't help it. The idea being bad just made it all the more *tempting*.

Oh my god, what's Mike going to think of you? Or Nancy? Or Holly when she's older? This is a recipe for divorce, Karen! And he's probably two decades younger than you are! Okay, okay, okay...so here's the plan. You're gonna step back and head straight for your car. Forget that you dressed up and everything, you need to leave...now! Hurry before-

The door opened and there he was. Still as handsome and alluring as he was the night that he asked help in finding his sister.

"Hey Mrs. Wheeler," Billy Hargrove said, "I was beginning to wonder if you had forgotten. Wanna come in?"

Alright, here's your chance. Say no!

"I'd love to, Billy," Karen said as she stepped in. As soon as the doors closed, she knew that she was about to make the worst mistake in her entire life.

STEVE

Date: A few days before school starts

Time: Morning (the day after)

Location: U.S. Army Recruitment Center

"Well, Mr. Harrington, do you have any other questions for us?"

Steve looked at the recruiter, not sure what to say. He had been planning this decision for months now and although he had convinced himself this was the best option, he still had doubts. A decision like this meant leaving Hawkins.

Leaving everyone he knows and loves.

Leaving the safety of the town that he grew up in.

Leaving a possible life of boredom and normality (or whatever constituted 'normal' in Hawkins).

This was the unknown for him. He would be alone on this journey. Maybe his family and friends would continue to support him but other than that, he would be out in a different state, on his own. It was now or never for him.

Well, Nancy's not coming back anytime soon. And Jonathan's got a gig in Indianapolis. I'm not even sure if Dustin still needs me, he seems to be doing fine on his own. Maybe it's best if I just slip out. I'm not growing here anymore, I need this change. Sorry everyone. My mind's made up.

"No, no questions right now," Steve said.

"Good. Well, since you selected 'direct ship' as your option, you'll be headed out to Fort Benning in Georgia in about...a week or two. So just be ready by then."

"Sounds good with me."

"Excellent, son. You made a great decision. Your father would be proud of you, joining the army and all."

"I'm sure he would."

Notes for the Chapter:

For the sake of this story, I will be treating Nina and Kira at the same level as the rest of the main cast. Let's just say, a big chunk of the story will revolve around their characters.

P.S.: For funsies, I pictured Sophia Lillis (Beverly Marsh from IT) as Kira Bartlett. That's why I emphasized her being a redhead.

Anyways, if you want, please leave a kudos and a comment, any feedback is welcome!

4. War Stories

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce Byers learns more about Jim Hopper and Steve Harrington's past as well as the Hargrove-Mayfield family's history. Max, Mike, and Eleven learn more about Neil Hargrove and the reason why he moved his family to Hawkins. As all of this is happening, Dr. Owens' life takes an unexpected turn...

JOYCE I

Date: August 1985, the day before school starts

Time: Morning

Location: Police station

"He's not in right now."

Joyce Byers sighed at Flo as she set her newly bought toaster on a nearby counter. Of all the hours in the day that Jim Hopper could not be in, he had to choose the time when she came in. *Typical, just typical.*

"If you would like to wait a little bit, I'm sure he'll be in around ten minutes," Flo continued.

"No, it's fine," Joyce said, waving off Flo's suggestion, "Just tell him I dropped off his toaster."

"Why is he having you drop off his appliances? Why not just drop it off at his cabin?"

"Well, I thought I could catch him at work!"

"Yeah, but that's a little strange, don't you think? I only ever see you at the station when it's something urgent. Delivering kitchen

appliances is nowhere near as urgent as your son going missing. Something you're not telling me?"

"What are you talking about, Flo?"

"Don't think I haven't been noticing you spending more time with the Sheriff. It's been nearly a year of healing for you after Mr. Newby died in a car accident, so I was thinking-"

"-oh god, no! Nothing like that. We're just friends. And I'm just delivering the toaster, as his friend." Joyce hoped that her face wouldn't turn red and give Flo more of a reason to tease her. *Just this once, brain, work with me here.*

"Why, does he need one? Care to explain how you know Mr. Hopper needs a toaster, Miss Byers?"

Joyce stopped, sweating at the question. She didn't want to say it but the only reason why she bought the toaster in the first place was as a gift to the Hopper family after Jane mentioned it.

"I wish we had a new toaster," Jane had said, looking dejectedly at the old, now-broken one.

"What happened to this one?" Joyce had asked.

"I broke it. I got angry at dad for taking my TV away and I destroyed the cabin on accident."

That was all Joyce needed to hear before she went out and bought a toaster, using the bonus she recently got at work. In her mind, she was doing this to make Jane happy. However, part of her also wanted to impress Hopper. Seeing him happy didn't sound so bad. Plus, it was her way of repaying him for all the times he helped, whether it was finding Will or helping Will through his episodes. However, she couldn't say that out loud, not with Flo suggesting she had ulterior motives.

"His daughter said they lost their toaster, so he bought one and had it shipped to my house since there was problems with his cabin's mailing address. And now I'm dropping it off. That's that, no other reason."

"Oh really, Joyce," Flo said with a grin, "So Hopper's daughter who magically appeared out of nowhere said that she and her dad needed a toaster. And here you are, of all people, delivering that toaster. Now that you mentioned it, Jane really did come out of nowhere. Jim hasn't even mentioned who the mom is. Maybe your reasons go a little bit deeper than just helping the family out."

"Oh my god, now you think I'm the mom?" *Good lord, this woman, I can't even believe she'd make that suggestion!*

Flo laughed as she took a sip of coffee. "I never said that but I like the way you think." At that, Flo walked away with the toaster tucked right under her arms. Joyce resisted the urge to flip her the middle finger as she turned around to leave. She had a busy day ahead of her, especially with doing inventory at work.

As Flo disappeared from Joyce's sight, Joyce heard a loud bang to her side. She turned and saw a well-muscled teenager with a mullet storm out of the station. An older man with a mustache followed closely behind him, looking furious as he did. A little curious, Joyce stepped outside to see how the situation would unfold.

"Screw you, old man!" the teenager shouted as he walked across the street.

"Damn it, Billy, this is the thanks I get for bailing you out," the older man shouted back, "Go hang out with the rest of your faggot friends! Don't you even think about calling me from a police station again!" The older man then gave up chasing the teenager, choosing instead to grumble to himself.

Hmm...Billy? Jonathan and Steve mentioned a 'Billy'. That must be the new kid, Billy Hargrove. And that must be his father. Ouch, rough family. I thought I had it bad with Lonnie.

Trusting her gut, Joyce decided to stay out of the Hargrove family's problems and keep walking down the street. She only made it a few steps before the older man walked up to her and said, "Uh, miss, I believe you dropped this." He held out a set of keys which Joyce recognized were the keys to Melvald's General Store. In a rush to get away from the situation, she had dropped her work keys on accident.

Joyce mentally cursed herself as she thanked the man and put the keys in her pocket.

"You're welcome," the man said, "Oh, and sorry if you had to witness that. Just some stuff I'm dealing with my son. I usually have a strong hold on my temper but...you know how children can be. They bring out the worst in you sometimes."

"It's no problem," Joyce quickly said, deciding not to berate the man for excusing his own harsh words, "I mean, I have two sons of my own so I know a thing or two about dealing with boys."

"Yeah, boys will be boys. Dealing with girls is much easier. I have a stepdaughter who is much easier to deal with. She's respectful and knows how to act properly. I still love my son and all but there are days where I wish he was a lot more like his stepsister."

Should I feel offended by that statement? I don't know. Just nod your head Joyce and you'll be out of here in no time. "Don't know if I agree with that. I've never had to raise a girl so...yeah."

Suddenly, the man extended his hand. Joyce shook it on instinct but felt incredibly awkward after doing so. "Oh, I'm Neil, by the way. Neil Hargrove. I didn't catch your name."

You never asked for it. "I never said it. But it's Joyce. Joyce Byers."

At that, Neil seemed to stop, as if he were processing the information. Joyce looked at him, concerned. Neil, with a contemplating look on his face, then said, "Joyce Byers. As in Joyce Rachel Byers?"

Joyce, caught off-guard by the mention of her full name, almost took a full step back, ready to run from Neil Hargrove. *Wait...what? How did he...how does he...*

"Um, yes, that's correct," Joyce said, cautiously, "How do you know my full name?"

Neil chuckled. He looked at the police station, as if he just had an epiphany. "Oh my god, I'm pretty sure you're the same Joyce Byers. Do you happen to know someone by the name of 'James Isaiah Hopper', also goes by 'Jim Hopper'?"

"Yes, actually. He's the police chief."

"Son of a gun. I knew that bastard was living in Indiana, I just didn't know it was this specific town. Now that's one hell of a coincidence."

"I'm sorry, I'm lost. How do you know me and Jim?"

Neil clapped his hands together, happy at his newfound knowledge. "We fought together, in 'Nam. Battle of Khe Sanh. We weren't close friends but when you have to rely on each other just to survive, everyone's your best friend. He was Sergeant James Hopper while I was Corporal Neil Hargrove. He didn't tell me much about himself, except that he lived out in Indiana. I should stop by and say hi, for old time's sake."

Joyce couldn't believe what she was hearing. *Huh, they're war buddies. Jim never really talks about Vietnam. I don't know why.*

"How's the guy, by the way," Neil continued, "Does he talk about 'Nam? I'm assuming not since you didn't recognize my name."

"Yeah, he doesn't really talk about those days," Joyce confirmed. It was still awkward that she was having this conversation with a total stranger but she figured that she should keep this conversation going, now that it actually got interesting. "Jim doesn't really like talking about his past."

"I can see that. I talk about 'Nam from time to time but it's not like I'm proud of those days. Hopper and I...we weren't close but the guy was great to hang around. He never lost his cool, expected us to always be ready for anything, and he really took ownership of being a leader. That man was born to fight and lead."

"Sounds like Jim."

Awkward silence. Almost as if he realized just how awkward the situation became, Neil cleared his throat and said, "Well, it's been nice talking to you, Miss Byers, but I have to go. I have a son that I need to deal with. Gotta make sure he doesn't start anymore fights and vandalize people's cars. And that's just a few of the things he's done. A father's work is never done, you know."

Talking to a mother here, dick. "Of course, you do what you gotta do. Just don't be too harsh on the boy, he just got out of jail."

"Of course, I'll just talk to him about his behavior, no big deal. And afterwards, I have some other business to attend to. You free sometime this afternoon? There's actually a nice little event happening downtown that I'll be part of. You and your sons can visit-"

"-thanks for the offer but I have a busy day ahead of me. But seriously, it's been nice meeting you too. I'll make sure to tell Hopper you said hello once I meet him."

At that, Neil waved at her as he walked off towards Billy Hargrove's direction. Joyce then sighed as she continued walking in the direction she was going, hoping for no more awkward distractions.

ELEVEN

Date: The day before school starts

Time: Afternoon

Location: Outside Hawkins City Hall

An hour earlier

"Dad, I'm going to hang out with Mike and Max!" El cheerfully called out as she headed out of the cabin, "We're going downtown, check out the shops. Maybe do some shopping for school tomorrow!"

"Don't be late, kiddo," Hopper called back.

"I won't!"

"I know that this might be a controversial topic for the people of Hawkins but I think, in due time, they will come around and accept 'Defenders' as one of their own. In the next few months, I wouldn't be

surprised if there's a sudden growth in Hawkins' economy."

El, Mike, and Max watched as Neil Hargrove finished his interview with Hawkins' chief reporter, Irving Irons. The small crowd that formed began dispersing, with Neil answering last minute questions from people approaching him. Most of what Neil said had gone over El's head since she was unfamiliar with the concepts but Max and Mike were able to explain to her what he was talking about.

For the past few months, the question of why Max and Billy's family moved to Hawkins lingered with the group. Max had said that they probably moved because of Billy's behavior in California but she was never really sure herself. Now it was clear. Neil had just finished talking about how the business he started in California was expanding into Indiana. Max had facepalmed herself, not realizing just how obvious the answer was. When El asked what his business was, Max's response sent shivers down Mike and El's spines.

"He owns a company called 'Defenders'," Max had said earlier, "It's a private military company, which means other people hire my dad's people in order to kill other people."

Of course, the military aspect was only part of the appeal of 'Defenders'. Neil Hargrove had gone into detail about the various other jobs his company offered, such as management and healthcare. He then talked about how his time in Vietnam had shaped his company and the kind of people he did business with. That word, 'Vietnam', caught El's attention. She thought back to all those boxes that were underneath Hopper's cabin. Hopper never talked about his past military history. She had always wondered why but Mike told her that the memories may be too painful for Hopper.

"It's hard to explain," Mike had said to her, "Lots of people died in Vietnam. And I don't know how involved Chief Hopper was but I'm pretty sure he had to do terrible stuff there as well."

"Why?" El had asked innocently.

"Lots of reasons. To survive. Because he had orders. Vietnam was a giant mess, at least that's what my dad told me."

As the reporter and crowd left the scene, Neil Hargrove noticed the three high schoolers watching him. He smiled at their direction and, from the corner of El's eyes, she saw Max cringe in response. *What's gotten into her?*

"Hey, kiddos," Neil said as he approached them, "Hey Maxine. You two must be Maxine's friends. I don't think I've ever met any of her friends."

"Hello," El said, immediately regretting that she spoke up first.

"Good afternoon, sir," Mike followed up quickly, sparing El, "Name's Michael Wheeler."

"-Wheeler," Neil interrupted, "I heard about you. Max's mom told me that you were mean to Max in her first weeks here."

Max's eyes went wide, sensing the possible danger. El, almost by instinct, began to flex her fingers, ready to take Neil out in case anything happened. Just as quickly as she did, Mike quickly tapped her on her wrist. She relaxed her hand, knowing that the tap was Mike's way of telling her to relax.

Neil laughed and placed his hand on Mike's shoulder. "It's alright, son. Max also told me that, despite your rocky start, you and your friends brought her into your group. I appreciate that. It's hard to adjust to new surroundings, especially for kids your age. So thank you for helping Maxine get readjusted to Hawkins. I know she misses that Californian sun."

"Thank you sir."

Neil then turned his attention to El. "And you, I don't believe I got your name."

El looked at Max, hoping to get a sign on what to do in this situation. Max simply nodded her head, as if to tell her to just answer honestly. Looking back at Neil, El said, "I'm Jane Hopper."

"Jane...Hopper?" Neil asked. *Why the hell is that a question?* "Are you, by any chance, related to Jim Hopper?"

"That's my dad."

"Hmm...I guess it really has been a while. Back when I knew him, he only had one daughter. I don't know if he has ever mentioned me but we fought in Vietnam together. We weren't close and I'm pretty sure he doesn't remember me but we were in the thick of it. Your dad is one tough bastard."

Wait, what? Hopper never said anything about that. El and Mike looked at Max, who looked just as confused as they were.

Neil then turned to Max and walked over to her. "Maxine, I'm headed home now. Make sure you aren't out too late again, alright?"

Max, still with a confused look on her face, just nodded her head. "Got it, Neil."

"Also, if you find your brother, tell him that he needs to come home. He's been acting up again."

"If I run into him, I'll let him know."

With that, Neil waved goodbye to both Mike and El and walked away, headed to his car. As soon as he left their sight, El and Mike turned their attention to Max.

"Your dad knows my dad?" El asked, not meaning to sound so forceful, "How come you never told us!?"

Max held her hands up in defeat. "Yo, first off...it's Neil. My actual dad still lives in California. Second, I'm just as confused as both of you. I sincerely thought we knew no one here-"

"-oh, yeah, you knew no one here," Mike said, sarcastically, "Except the chief of police, who just happens to be your stepdad's war buddy."

"Hey, don't be snippy with me," Max snapped back, "Remember, I didn't know Hopper, Neil did. Emphasis on 'I'. Besides, what does it matter? So my stepdad fought together with Jane's adoptive dad. That's not that strange."

Mike and El looked at each other, conceding in defeat. They agreed that Max was right. It was less strange, more just a coincidence. Thinking nothing of it, El looked down the street, noticing the local clothing stores. She pointed in that direction and the three of them walked towards the shops to do their shopping for the first day of school.

A few hours passed.

After buying clothes for the first day of school, Max had gone home early, leaving Mike and El alone for the rest of the day. Taking a break from shopping, Mike took El to Sal's Coffee Company, Hawkins' premiere coffee shop. She had never drank coffee before but after her first cup, she was sure that it was her new favorite drink.

"Don't drink too much, you're going to get the jitters," Mike had said, playfully.

El wagged her tongue at him, brushing off his concerns. "It's okay, I can handle the...jitters. What are jitters?"

"It's what you get when you drink too much coffee. You can't sleep. It's like you're hyper-awake."

"I don't want to sleep right now so that's fine."

"Whatever you say, Jane."

"You know, when it's just us, you can call me El. I don't mind."

Mike nodded as he poured cream into his coffee. "I know. It's just weird now. Calling you El, I feel like I'm reminding you of the bad days, you know? That's why I like Jane. It comes from a better place. It's a name of love."

This boy's sweetness is going to be the death of me. "Ah, but 'El' also came from love. You gave me that name. Since it came from you, it can't be bad."

Mike chuckled and kissed her on the forehead, immediately making her blush. She could've sworn her face wasn't that red this morning. *Ah, so this is what Nancy described as a 'blush'.*

After a few more minutes of talking, Mike excused himself to go to the bathroom. Now by herself, El happily drank her fourth cup of coffee, not realizing that the more she drank, the less tired she was becoming. She could hardly believe how much she loved the drink. Even without the sugar, coffee gave her a surge of energy that she loved having.

Mid-sip, the doors to the coffee shop suddenly opened and a man rushed in, bumping into the cashier. El popped her head up to see what was happening. The man, a Latino male in his mid-thirties, looked tired and his face was covered in bruises. As he helped the cashier off of the ground, another person walked into the shop. El gasped when she recognized him as Billy Hargrove, Max's step-brother.

El had never officially met Billy Hargrove but she knew about him. She was ready to strangle him when Mike told her about how he had attacked the group and nearly beaten Steve to death. However, both Mike and Max had talked her down from enacting vengeance. Turns out, Max had already done most of the heavy lifting.

Billy grabbed the Latino man and shoved him onto the counter. The Latino man simply stared at Billy, unfazed.

"You ratted me out, Robbie!" Billy shouted. Several shop patrons began running out of the area, not wanting to get involved.

"If you weren't so busy banging women three times your age, you wouldn't be in this situation," Robbie said with venom in his tone. Taken aback, Billy let go of Robbie and stepped back. Robbie fixed his collar before looking Billy right in the eyes.

"Why man? I thought we were friends? Why'd you sell me out?"

"You know what your dad had to go through to establish 'Defenders'?" Robbie asked, "The sacrifices he made, the people he had to step on to get his way? He and Susan Mayfield have worked their asses off to get 'Defenders' where it is right now and the last thing that both of them needs is another goddamn scandal, like your stupid stunt in California."

"I only got caught because my stupid stepsister caught me." *Wait, Max? What the hell is he talking about?* "If Maxine had minded her own business, then none of this would've."

"-it's always the same with you, Billy. You always blame other people, instead of taking responsibility for your own, idiotic actions. If you want to stay out of trouble, don't seek it! It's that simple. If you don't want to piss off your dad, don't do anything that will embarrass him. Stop with the goddamn affairs with women you shouldn't be involved with. Stop vandalizing other people's property just for the sake of doing it. And stop trying to bully your way to be the big fish at the high school. I mean really, Bill, if your current goal in life is to be the most popular guy at the high school, you really are as dumb as your father says you are. Now, next time you lay your hands on me, I will not hesitate to break yours. That was a good right hook though. Keep training and you might actually beat me in a fight."

Robbie shoved Billy to the side and exited the shop. El watched as Billy, with tears in his eyes, kicked over a stand of newspapers before storming out. The cashier quickly fixed the news stand while making sure Billy and Robbie had fully left the area. As soon as the situation died down, Mike joined El at the table. He had a look of concern on his face since he missed the entire exchange.

"What just happened?" he asked.

El shrugged, not sure herself. Whatever was going on, she needed to go deeper. There was something about Max and Billy's family that wasn't sitting well with her and she was going to find out what it was.

JOYCE II

Date: The day before school starts

Time: Night

Location: Hopper family cabin

"Thanks again, for the toaster."

Joyce smiled as Jim Hopper tried out the machine with two pieces of bread. He was slightly amused when the bread came out fully toasted, just the way he liked it. He handed one slice to Joyce and took the other, immediately spreading butter on it before taking a big bite. His face lit up at the taste.

"I actually missed toasted bread," Hopper said with his mouth full, "Joyce Byers, you are a godsend."

"It's just bread, Hop," Joyce quipped, "You're acting like I gifted you manna, right from God itself."

"Might as well be! Jesus Christ, with Jane around, it's always waffles this, waffles that. Bread is almost foreign to me now. I never thought I'd say this but bread is underrated."

Joyce laughed as both of them finished their last slices. As Joyce wiped the crumbs from her face, she thought back to her conversation with Neil Hargrove earlier that day. It was awkward but she thought might as well bring it up.

"Hey Hop," Joyce started, "So I ran into an interesting fellow today. Does the name 'Neil Hargrove' ring any bells?"

Hopper looked back at her, his face in deep thought. He then said, "Yeah, he bailed his son out today. If I remember correctly, he's the guy who owns that PMC that's being set up downtown. I know a lot of people here in Hawkins don't like the thought of having a PMC nearby since most of the people here were firmly in the Doves camp-

"-except the Wheelers. Remember, Ted voted for Reagan. He was a Hawk in a nest of Doves."

"Don't remind me, Joyce. Anyways, yeah, he's the guy who's promising to boost Hawkins' economy with all the military jobs he's offering. We'll see."

"I mean, you're not wrong. But I ran into him today. He said he knew you."

Hopper raised his eyebrow, perplexed. Joyce decided to press the issue since she was curious herself. "He said that the two of you fought together in 'Nam. He name dropped the Battle of Khe Sanh. He knew me by my full name, and yours as well."

"Well, a lot of people knew me. I saved a lot of guys back in Khe Sanh. And anyone who knew me also knew that, whenever I had downtime, I only talked about life back at home. And at the time, you were one of the only people I'd talk about, next to Diane and Sarah. I'm pretty sure all those guys could name my loved ones off by their full names."

Joyce couldn't help but blush at that. It was nice to hear that she was in his thoughts while he was overseas.

Hopper tapped the table as he racked his brain. He then said, "Neil Hargrove...I wish I could say I remember him but there were so many guys that I worked with. For all I know, we probably met once at some dive in Hanoi or something. His name at least sounds familiar, I'll give him that."

"Well, you certainly left an impression on him, by the way he talked about you. He made it sound like you were war buddies."

Hopper scoffed at that. "In war, pretty much everyone on your side is your war buddy. Can't be too picky since the guy you just met might be dead the very next hour. If Neil thought we were close friends, then fine. But I don't really remember him."

"Who would you say then was your war buddy? If you don't mind me asking?"

Joyce took out a cigarette to smoke, not noticing that Hop's face had fallen when she asked him that. When she did notice, she mentally cursed herself, realizing that she had asked something that he felt uncomfortable about. Joyce was just about to tell him to ignore her question when he took a sip of bourbon that he had poured earlier.

"You remember Eugene Addison?" Hopper asked.

Joyce nodded her head. *Eugene the Small Bean? Of course I remember*

him. Like Hop and Bob Newby, Joyce grew up with Eugene, who lived a few streets away from her. If she had to make the comparison, Hopper was a lot like the Lucas of their group while she was definitely the Eleven (Will even commented on how similar they looked). Bob was definitely the Mike. As for Eugene, he was the Dustin. Good ole Eugene, he was small but his opinions were definitely loud and proud. But he also had a soft side. He could be stubborn but the group knew he only wanted what was best for everyone.

During the Vietnam War, Hopper and Eugene were among those who had been drafted. It hurt when she learned that Eugene didn't make it back. Hopper never disclosed how he died and Joyce never bothered to press the issue. Until now.

"You know he was gonna be Sarah's godfather?"

Joyce smiled at that. "I thought you promised Bob would have that honor."

"Well, I mean, I liked Bob Newby and all and I don't mean to disrespect the dead. But Eugene was Eugene. He knew me better. He was the one who set me up with Diane and told me to pursue law enforcement. Said that I was a natural at being a cop. I don't know how he knew but the man just understood me."

"Same for me. Back in high school, he taught me how to dance for prom. I tried teaching his moves to Will and Jonathan but they called my moves 'old-fashioned', as if there's something wrong with that!"

Hopper and Joyce laughed at that. "Yeah. Good ole' Gene. I never told you how it happened. How he died."

Joyce's smile faded. She placed her hands on his, not sure what she was doing but hoping that it was comforting him. "You don't have to tell me if it's too uncomfortable for you-

"-no, no, it's fine. It's been years since it happened. Might as well get it out, you know? It actually didn't happen in Vietnam. This was 1970. We were in Cambodia at the time."

"Cambodia? We weren't at war with them though."

"Yeah, but you know just how much of a mess that whole shit was. Fighting spilled over to Cambodia and we were there to respond. Eugene and I...we'd been through the thick of it. Khe Sanh was the worst. I remember taking a bullet by my hip and thinking to myself that...that was it. Game over. I wouldn't get to see my daughter, wife, and Hawkins again. I was gonna die in some faraway country for a cause that I didn't believe in. But Eugene got me through it. He pulled me to safety and made sure I got the help that I needed. I know the guys liked to talk about how I saved their asses in Khe Sanh and maybe I did do a lot of heavy-lifting but Eugene was the true hero. And then, cut to two years later, we're in Cambodia. Eugene...changed in the two years."

"Changed how?"

"It's hard to describe. Some part of him died after Khe Sanh. He just seemed so...distant. He used to argue with me all the time over everything. We argued about football, politics, shaving techniques, you name it. By the time we were in Cambodia, he just let me win. He didn't have it in him anymore. The longer we were in Cambodia, the less stable he got. There were days where he forgot to eat and other days where he would just sit by himself and stare off into the distance. Now that I think about it, I think part of him wanted to die. He just seemed so listless, like he could step on a mine and not care if it blew up or not. He never said it out loud but that's the impression he gave off."

"Jesus..."

"Yeah. So we're a few weeks into the Cambodian Campaign. We're hiding in some ditch because the town next to us was infested with Viet Cong. As we wait for the go ahead to storm the bastards, he says something to me that really threw me off. 'Tell him I said I'm sorry. Tell his mom that I didn't mean to abandon her. Tell her to not take my name and to forget me'. I was going to ask what he meant when all of a sudden, the Viet Cong attacked. He didn't follow orders that day. He chose to charge the enemy and...well...when you have ten or so enemy troops firing at you, running headfirst into the gunfire won't end well for anyone."

Oh god...Eugene. Joyce wiped away a single tear that rolled down her face at the end of Hop's story. She knew Eugene died in battle but hearing how it happened hit her hard. She took in a big puff of smoke before pouring herself a glass of bourbon. She drank the alcohol in one go, hoping that it would numb the pain. It didn't.

Hopper poured himself another glass. "It took me years to figure out what Eugene meant. I was going to ask him who he was talking about but I never got the answer. Then, Sarah happened and I completely forgot about trying to find an answer. And then, I think it was either in 1981 or 1982 when Bonnie Harrington told me that Lars Harrington wasn't Steve's father."

What?

What?

Wait, what?

Joyce stared blankly at Hopper as he sipped away at his drink. "Um...what did you say?" That's all that Joyce could muster.

"Turns out, Steve Harrington is technically 'Steve Addison'. I did the math. Steve was born in April 24, 1966. Eugene told me that he had an encounter with Bonnie Harrington in late 1965, back when she was 'Bonnie O'Shea'. It was a one-night stand that they never discussed with anyone else...besides me of course. She told me that because I was close to Eugene, she felt comfortable telling me the truth. I don't think Steve knows but...I can see it. Every time I look at the kid, I don't see Lars, I see Eugene and his smug face. He, Eugene, and that Dustin boy...it's like looking at three generations of the same family."

"Why didn't you tell me this?!"

Hopper paused, unsure how to answer. He then shrugged. "I don't know why. Guess I never had a reason to share the story. But now you know."

"Does Steve know?"

"No. And Bonnie told me that we should keep this a secret, for now."

Last thing she wants is for Lars to learn that he isn't Steve's biological father-

"-but they're living a lie! Hop, you can't tell me you're okay with this!"

"I mean, technically, I'm living a lie too. Jane's my 'daughter', remember? I have the birth certificate and everything. Barbara Holland wasn't killed by a monster from another dimension, she was killed in a freak accident caused by the government. Bob Newby wasn't killed by a pack of monsters, he was on his way to Indianapolis when all of a sudden, he lost control of his car and rammed right into a big rig going the other direction. It's something I learned while fighting in Vietnam."

"What?"

"Sometimes the truth isn't what people need. Sometimes...the truth halts progress. If you had a choice between knowing the truth and having everyone's lives suffer for it or spreading a lie and benefiting society as a whole, why would anyone ever choose the truth? Ignorance is bliss, Joyce."

Joyce shook her head at that. Part of her didn't want to believe in that way of thinking. But part of her was also worried that Hopper might be correct.

SAM

Date: August 1985

Time: Night

Location: Owens' home, Boston, Massachusetts

"Estelle, I'm home!"

Sam Owens closed the door behind him,, shaking off the rain that had soaked his coat on the way back from work. He had a late night at the university and now, he just wanted to relax and watch some

TV before getting some sleep. Surprisingly, Estelle wasn't running around the house as she usually did.

Estelle. Owens thought back to the day he found her, which was coincidentally the day all the strange things in Hawkins began. He never found out what Estelle really was, how she managed to survive the Upside Down, and any connection she could have to the "Mind Flayer". He spent weeks doing research on the Upside Down but in the end, he found nothing. None of the research he did on Will Byers told him anything relevant about Estelle, making him feel like his time in Hawkins was pointless.

Well, not entirely. Owens did feel proud that he legitimized Jane Ives' citizenship and gave Jim a second chance at being a father. Even he became a father ever since he adopted Estelle. She had started out as another test subject to prod and examine but the more he talked with the little girl, the more attached he became.

"Papa," Estelle had said during one of their earlier examinations.

"Yes, papa, that's right," Owens had said in return. He had asked her to name a term for a 'male parental figure' and 'papa' was the first word she came up with.

"Are you my papa?" she then asked. Owens didn't say anything but he knew then and there that he couldn't treat her like a test dummy.

"Estelle, papa's home!" Owens shouted out again as he placed his keys on the kitchen counter, "Where you at? Let's watch that Star Wars movie, I know you were excited for-"

Sam stopped right in his tracks when he saw it. There was a piece of paper taped to Estelle's bedroom door. The message was simple and clear;

DON'T BE MAD, DAD. GONE AWAY. DON'T TRY TO FIND ME.

Notes for the Chapter:

Stick with me on this story building, the pace will pick up around chapters five or six, I promise! Just like the actual show. Also, I really wish I can say

why the Vietnam War backstories will be important but that'd be spoilers. Trust me, Neil and Hopper's mutual history of fighting in Vietnam will come back in a (hopefully) surprising way!

Hint: It has to do with the Hargrove-Mayfield family's private military company, 'Defenders' (in case it wasn't obvious).

Anyways, if you want, please leave a kudos and a comment! Any feedback is more than welcome! Please let me know what you think of the story so far, it helps with the writing process!

5. Moving Away

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan, Nancy, and Steve discuss their plans to move away from Hawkins. As this is happening, Jonathan and Nancy encounter several strange people who may have ties to the Huang family and Steve encounters a familiar face...

JONATHAN

Date: First day of school

Time: Afternoon, end of the school day

Location: Sal's Coffee Company

A few months earlier...

"Jonathan, are you there?" Nancy said excitedly as she called the Byers residence.

"It's me, Nance, what do you need?" Jonathan asked, sounding a bit tired.

"I just got my acceptance letter in the mail! Jonathan, I'm going to the University of Indianapolis! I'm gonna be a lawyer!" Nancy screamed, eliciting a groan from Mike who she could hear from downstairs. Nancy smiled when she heard Jonathan's cheers through the phone. She could practically see him fist bump into the air as he cheered.

"Congrats babe!" Jonathan said, "Looks like things are working out exactly how we want them to go."

"I know, right? First you got that job offer to shoot photography in Indianapolis, now this! We can plan our move together! Now you don't have to worry about choosing either the job and breaking up with me or losing the job to stay with me."

"Hey now, I was never going to break up with you. You know that, right?"

"Of course! Anyways, I'm coming over in a few hours. We should talk about the move in person, you know?"

"I got the apartment!"

Jonathan Byers nearly spat out his coffee as soon as Nancy Wheeler said that. Instead, he forced himself to swallow the hot drink to avoid pissing off his girlfriend (she would've been hit with the coffee if Jonathan had spat since she was sitting right in front of him). Nancy didn't notice his pain as she was too busy gloating over her acceptance letter.

Since last March, Nancy had gotten accepted into the University of Indianapolis. Her goal was pursuing a career in law and after numerous letters sent to the colleges of her choice, she was finally accepted in her second pick (Jonathan: "UC Berkeley is too far anyways. Trust me, this will be better than your first choice). The decision worked out amazingly well since Jonathan had gotten a photography gig in Indianapolis around late February. Although their parents refused to have them room together, Jonathan and Nancy agreed to find apartments near each other to make up for the distance.

"That's amazing, babe!" Jonathan said as he stood up and hugged Nancy, who squeezed him back, hard. He could hear her slightly crumbling the letter, accidentally squishing it in her excitement. Nancy then let go and sat back in her seat to enjoy the rest of her sandwich.

"This isn't, cheating, right?" Nancy said, still excited, "I mean, your mom was a little more open to us rooming with each other but my mom and dad...hell no. You saw the look in my dad's face when I asked him."

Yeah, and that was the most emotion I've seen from Ted Wheeler since I met the guy. "Honestly, I think that was less anger and more frustration since he wanted to get back to watching Cheers,"

Jonathan joked, "And it's not cheating. We did what they asked. We're not rooming with each other. We're just...in two separate rooms that just happen to be in the same building. And on the same floor."

Nancy laughed and took a bite of her sandwich. Her mind deep in contemplation, she looked right into Jonathan's eyes and asked, "How do you feel? About moving away? Me going to college and you becoming a professional photographer. It all feels like we're moving too fast but...I think it feels right. What do you think?"

Jonathan wondered this as well. As he sat there, trying to come up with an answer, he thought back to a conversation he had with Will and Joyce over the same question.

"I know you always wanted to pursue photography as a career," Joyce had said while she was cooking dinner, "So you know you have my support. But I feel like that's not what you're concerned about."

Jonathan nodded. He didn't have any strong feelings towards Hawkins. There were plenty of things he loved about it, such as the friends he made. And Nancy of course. And then there were the things that he hated, such as Lonnie and the cliques. Of course there was the chaos from the Upside Down and the government but that was a given. Still, despite all the problems he faced in Hawkins, he realized he would miss the place once he moved away to Indianapolis. Even more so, he was scared of the idea that once he came back home, the town would be different than how he remembered it.

That was when he realized that change was what he was scared of, not the actual move.

"I guess I'm just...scared," Jonathan had said as he helped Joyce around the kitchen, "I don't know if I'm ready for things to be different."

"I think it'll be fine, Jonathan," Will said as he drew into his notebook, "Besides, I've been looking forward to you moving out so I can get your room!"

Jonathan rolled his eyes as Will and Joyce laughed at him.

His mother and brother supported his dreams. In the end, it was his own fears and worries that were weighing him down. But he wasn't sure how to express that to Nancy.

Jonathan gently took hold of Nancy's hands, hoping to reassure her that things would be fine. "I think...we just need to figure this out as it happens. Maybe we're overthinking the move. I think we just need to go through with the preparations and planning and deal with the consequences as we experience them, you know?"

Nancy nodded her head. "Yeah, that seems to be the best way to go."

"If it makes you feel any better, mom and Will are really excited for me to go. For both of us, really. So it's not like we don't have any support. We can always come back to Hawkins if things go bad in Indianapolis. If we didn't have that safety net, then yeah, I'd be a lot more worried about this move since it is incredibly risky. But look at what we survived these past two years. I'm pretty sure paying the bills, going to work and college are nothing compared to fighting monsters from another dimension."

Nancy chuckled at the ridiculousness of the statement. It was true though, both of them would rather deal with boring, everyday problems over the end-of-the-world type problems. "Wish I can say the same about my parents," Nancy said as she finished chuckling, "My dad doesn't care about where I go, as long as I'm not rooming with a boy. Shows where his mind is at. And my mom...I just don't know about her. Recently, it seems like her mind is all over the place. There are times where I feel like I'm being more responsible than she is."

"Wait, Karen? I don't get it, I thought she was the parent that you actually trusted and respected?"

"Yeah...until last year. Jonathan, I haven't talked to anyone about this but I think my mom's...changed. For the worse."

"Oh come on, Karen can't be that out of the loop-"

"-Jonathan, just hear me out on this. Please?"

Oh shit...what's going on in the Wheeler house? Hearing the seriousness in Nancy's tone, Jonathan immediately stopped talking to let her speak. He quietly sipped his coffee and nodded his head for her to continue.

Nancy sighed, struggling to put her thoughts into words. "It's not just me. Mike notices it too. She's coming home late. Whenever she is around the house, she always has a glass of wine on her. I don't think I've talked to her sober ever since Jane closed the gate. She's been hooked onto her romance books that sometimes I feel like she cares more about her fictional characters over the real people in her life. My dad doesn't care enough to ask what's been going on with her and Mike and I are too scared to do anything about it. Plus, there's Holly, who should be our main concern. Mom still cares for her but at this point, I'm seriously considering hiring a babysitter, sending her to my uncle in Maine, or something to care for Holly. I just don't know what's happening with mom! It's like she stopped caring about trying to be a good parent, like she's going through some mid-life crisis or something. She's only looking out for herself now. And if it is a mid-life crisis, I'm pissed that she won't tell us and ask for our help."

"Is it affecting Mike?"

"Of course! But Mike at least has his friends to be with. Jane especially. Kinda ironic, huh? When they first met, Jane relied on him for everything. Now he relies on her for emotional support. Steve's been pretty good to him too. And Hopper and Joyce have pretty much become his second parents at this point. So no, I'm not desperate to get my mom to do better since Mike and I are doing fine on our own. But goddamn it, our independence doesn't excuse her for being a shitty mom! Sorry Jonny, I don't mean to dump all my problems on you-

Jonathan waved her off. *This is what I asked for when we got together.* "-Nah, it's fine Nance. That's part of my boyfriend responsibilities. If you ever have a problem, I'm always here for you to talk to."

Catching Jonathan off-guard, Nancy leaned over and kissed him right on the mouth. He closed his eyes for a brief second as she sat back down. Jonathan felt his face burn from the blush that was coming.

"Thank you for listening," Nancy said, "It feels good to talk about this. And really, I don't know who else to talk to about mom."

"Of course. And maybe it's not my place to say this but...I know what it's like to have a shitty parent. He's not with mom anymore but he's still...there. You can still feel his presence in the house. But me and Will survived. You, Mike, and Holly can survive as well."

"I don't think my parents are as bad as Lonnie but I'll keep that in mind-" Nancy stopped talking and looked beyond Jonathan. She had a surprised expression, as if she just noticed someone behind him. Curious, Jonathan turned around to see what he was looking at.

It was a group of four sitting a few tables away from them. The four were staring right at Jonathan and Nancy, not blinking as they did. One of the four, an African-American female in her mid-forties, had a pendant with a symbol that he recognized from somewhere. It was a lion's head with rings around it. Thinking back, Jonathan remembered that he saw the symbol from a pamphlet about the Huang family's meet-and-greet the next day. Those pamphlets had been floating around Hawkins ever since construction on the Huang family manor started. He wasn't planning on going but now, seeing these strangers with the same symbol staring at him just reinforced his decision to not attend.

Nancy shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Those people are staring at us," she whispered.

"They're not blinking either," Jonathan said, "We should go."

"Yeah."

Nancy stood up from her seat and Jonathan followed suit. He quickly paid for the food and coffee before heading to the door. As he did, the African-American woman stood up and blocked the way. Jonathan stifled a gasp as the woman stared right at him and Nancy.

"Excuse us," Nancy said, "We need to be going."

The woman said nothing. Instead, she reached into her pocket and pulled out an envelope. Jonathan made a fist, ready to strike in case

the situation went south. However, the woman did not attack them as he expected. Instead, she just handed him the envelope.

"Come join us tomorrow, at the Huang family manor," the woman said. Her voice was cheery but something about her tone sounded...robotic. Like she was 'trained' to say these words. "The Huangs would like to meet the entire town of Hawkins. Please help them feel more welcome."

Nancy looked at Jonathan, not sure what to say. Jonathan slightly crinkled the envelope, not being able to get a good read on the woman's intentions. "Sure," he said, "We'll check it out."

"Bring all your friends and family," the woman said, "We look forward to seeing you all soon." She then walked away and sat back down with the rest of her group, who were still staring at both of them. As soon as she rejoined them, like a switch, the four began talking with each other like normal human beings. Seeing them go back to normal was almost as terrifying as them staring.

Without hesitating, Jonathan and Nancy exited the coffee shop and headed for Jonathan's car. Nancy wrapped her arm around Jonathan's arm and held him close. Although they wanted to talk about what just happened, they elected to keep walking and get away from the area as soon as possible.

NANCY

Date: First day of school

Time: Night

Location: Movie theater

Three hours earlier

"We should go watch 'Cocoon'," Jonathan said, "It'll get your mind off from those creepy people from earlier."

"Wanna invite Steve?" Nancy said, "We can talk to him about the move. I wanna see if he's okay with it, you know?"

"Of course. He deserves to know."

"I'm leaving at the end of the month."

Nancy Wheeler could only stare at Steve Harrington in disbelief. Jonathan Byers had just gone to the bathroom after the movie ended, giving them a chance to talk. Before Nancy could even ask what Steve thought of 'Cocoon' before talking to him about her big move, he cut her off with his own surprise reveal. He was leaving Hawkins.

Nancy took a step back, not sure how to process this information. She took a mouthful of leftover popcorn before asking, "For what reason?"

Steve sighed, obviously uncomfortable about this topic. "I was going to tell you and Jonathan eventually," Steve said, "Sorry Nancy...I made my choice. I'm enlisting in the U.S. Army. I already got all of my papers approved. I'm sorry that I never told you about this but...this is what's happening."

"Army! You never mentioned anything about the army!"

"Well, why would I talk to you about my personal life? Not obligated to anymore, you know...now that we're not together-"

"-Oh, wow, you could've at least told me as a friend!"

"Well, whatever. This is what's happening and now you know. And come on, it's not like you and Jonathan aren't planning on leaving Hawkins too. Right, Miss College Girl?"

"Well...well...yeah, you're right." Nancy couldn't find it in herself to argue. It was true, she couldn't deny that they were on their way out as well. "I was going to tell you. University of Indianapolis. I'll be living in the same apartment as Jonathan. He's got his photography gig in the city so it all worked out pretty well."

"Yeah, that does sound pretty perfect," Steve said with a soft smile.

Nancy wasn't sure if the smile was genuine or if he was smiling for appearance sake. "You and Byers are moving to the capital. You're gonna be an amazing doctor, professor, or whatever it is that you want to be. I'm going to Fort Benning, Georgia where I'll be bunked with several other dudes for thirteen weeks. Don't worry, it's my decision."

Nancy nodded, not sure what to say. She couldn't kiss him or hug him like she normally did, which made every encounter since their breakup even more awkward. Nancy then settled for shaking his hand, hoping it was a friendly enough gesture without being too awkward of a move. "Well...it's brave of you to do so. I'm proud of you."

At that, Steve smiled at Nancy. Catching her off-guard, he hugged her and she hugged him back. The hug felt hollow to her for some reason, knowing that he would be gone by the end of the month. Then again, it was not like she was staying in Hawkins either. Maybe she didn't like the idea of moving in general, that was what she decided. Earlier, when she had this discussion with Jonathan, it didn't occur to her that things were changing a lot quicker than she thought. She had gotten comfortable with living in Hawkins, doing the same things every day and meeting the same people. But Steve mentioning that he was leaving really put things into perspective. From here on out, everything would be different. Different people, different settings, different experiences. It was exciting but right now, Nancy was feeling one thing.

She hated change. Of course, she wasn't about to tell Steve that she hated that things were changing. That was a problem she had to deal with on her own.

The two broke their hug just as Jonathan joined them. He still had a smile on his face from the movie. Nancy chuckled to herself when she thought back to how mesmerized Byers was at the strange, sci-fi story that they watched. It wasn't her favorite genre but at least someone enjoyed the movie.

"Hey, what did I miss?" he asked. Jonathan's smile dropped when he noticed Nancy's expression. Realizing the situation, Steve let out a fake cough and pulled Jonathan to the side.

"Hey bud, I gotta tell you something," Steve said as they walked away.

"Can't you say it in front of Nancy?"

"She already knows. Come on. We can talk about it over some ICEEs. Trust me, you're gonna want that ICEE."

After Jonathan got over the shock of Steve's surprise move, the three of them separated ways. Jonathan and Steve headed home while Nancy decided to stop by Hawkins High for a quick second. She sat on a bench, taking in her environment, knowing that she would be gone in a few weeks. It was knowing that she would miss the school that made her almost hyper-aware of her surroundings. Things she didn't notice before suddenly became noticeable to her.

The wooden sign that said "HAWKINS HIGH SCHOOL", which she didn't realize had been recently repainted and renovated.

The football field which she only visited for special events looked much smaller from where she was sitting.

The parking lot was definitely a lot bigger than she remembered but then she noticed the patch of land that the school was given recently as part of an expansion program by city hall.

The dirty, brick walls which she just realized needed to be renovated due to their old age.

Everything was familiar and yet somehow different. Although she didn't much care for Hawkins High, she knew that she was going to miss the place. It was only natural. Nancy kicked away at some leaves that were piling around her feet and lied down on the bench, her mind still deep in contemplation.

Can't believe I'm gonna miss this shitty town. Come on, girl! You're gonna be a big city girl in a few weeks! Stop acting like a small town girl! Jesus Christ, you're acting like this town's going to blow up-

CLANG!

Nancy sat up and immediately turned around to see where the noise

came from. To her surprise, she saw a strange man at the entrance of the school. It was one of the people from the coffee shop. He was a lanky, white man in his thirties with several tattoos running down his neck. He also had the same lion-head-with-rings pendant, which Nancy could see even from where she was. The man was breathing heavily as he stared right at her.

"World of darkness, god of the negative," the man muttered, "He will come again and take what is rightfully his."

"What did you say?"

Ignoring her, the man repeated his mantra again. "World of darkness, god of the negative, he will come again and take what is rightfully his."

What the French toast is this bullshit? Nancy didn't want to know. She turned to flee...just as she was blinded by a bright, white light. Nancy shielded her eyes, hoping to see what was in front of her. As her vision cleared up, she saw the outline of a bike with headlights. She breathed a sigh of relief, believing that it was Mike and friends. Her smile fell when she didn't recognize who the person was.

The little girl stepped off of her bike and approached Nancy. Nancy recognized the girl from one of the pamphlets about the Huang family's manor. Her hair was much shorter than the picture but it was definitely the same girl. *Nina Huang? I think that's her name. What's she doing here?!*

"Are you okay?" Nina asked. Her voice was full of genuine concern. Nancy turned to the strange, tattooed man, who was still standing at the school's entrance.

"I'm fine," Nancy said, "I don't know what's happening with that man over there." Nina looked ahead and frowned. There was a look of recognition, as if she knew who that man was.

"I see," Nina said, "Go home. Or at least, get behind me. I'll deal with him."

"You'll what? Deal with what? What are you doing here, what's going

on-"

"-none of this is your concern. It's my problem. Now stand back, please?" Nancy did what Nina told her to and stepped back. Nina then approached the tattooed man, who turned his attention to Nina.

The tattooed man frowned at Nina. "You're not supposed to be out this late," the man said. Surprising Nancy, Nina punched the man in the gut. She could feel the force of the punch from where she was. The tattooed man immediately doubled over and fell to his knees. Nina, now at face level with the man, slapped him hard on the face. Once again, Nancy could feel the impact. Everything felt deliberate with this girl.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that again, Lester," Nina said, her voice full of venom, "I will do what I damn well please. You and the others need to learn your place. Father and mother wants this move to go smoothly and it won't work if you and the others start harassing and scaring the residents here! I heard about what you and your friends did at the coffee shop earlier today. You think this is a game? You think that just because mom and dad likes you and your friends that it gives you the right to pull whatever bullshit stunt you can think of? If you four ever pull anything like that again, I will tell mother and she'll send you back to the ditch from where you crawled out from. Do I make myself clear?"

Lester grumbled as he nodded his head. "Yes, Madame Huang," Lester said, "I understand."

"Now you will apologize to the lady here and head back home. Don't let me catch you misbehaving again."

Lester stood up and glared at Nina, who glared at him back. Nancy instinctively took a step back as Lester approached her. He bowed and said, "I'm sorry for scaring you. Please forgive me."

Um...what just happened? Did that little girl just...what is going on?! Nancy didn't know how to react to the situation. All she could do was follow along, hope that these two would leave her alone, and head home as soon as possible. "Um, that's okay," Nancy said, "All is forgiven. Seriously, we're cool now."

Lester stood back up and walked away, disappearing into the night. Nancy breathed a sigh of relief.

Now gone, Nina approached Nancy. As she approached, Nancy noticed that Nina was clutching at her sleeves. There was a brief moment where the wind nearly pushed her sleeve up but Nina quickly acted, making sure only her hands were visible. She didn't want to make any quick assumptions but it looked like Nina was shielding her arms, as if she didn't want Nancy to see them. *Hmm...I wonder why...*

"Sorry for Lester," Nina said, "He and his friends work with my mom and dad. I heard that they were misbehaving ever since they came to Hawkins so I've just been trying to find them and get them home."

"Misbehaving?" Nancy said in disbelief, "You call that misbehaving!? I thought he was gonna kill me!"

"He won't do that. Trust me, Lester is...weird, but not as dangerous as he appears to be. He's just...there's something wrong with his head, okay? He doesn't socialize like we do. In fact, all of his friends don't socialize like normal people. It's hard to explain."

Nancy would usually ask for an explanation but she was too tired, too stressed out to even think coherently. She decided to just go along with what Nina said and nodded her head. *I'll ask another time.*

Just as Nancy was about to leave, Nina said, "So...you got an invitation to the mansion? The event tomorrow?"

Uh oh, where is this little girl going with this? "Yeah. I'm pretty sure everyone in Hawkins has gotten an invitation by now."

Nina nodded her head and frowned, unhappy at this. For what reason, Nancy couldn't tell. "I can't force you not to come. If you decide to show up, that's your own choice. But word of advice. Don't trust my parents."

Okay, this went from scary to calm and back to scary again. "Wait, what? What are you talking about-"

"-don't. Trust. My. Parents. Don't trust anyone with the lion's head

pendant. Don't believe everything you hear at the mansion. Whatever you do, just stay safe and don't poke your head in affairs that don't concern you. Also, please pass this message to William Byers. He needs to know in case he's going. Also, tell that boyfriend of yours the same thing."

"Wait, you can't just tell me that and not explain why! Why shouldn't I trust your parents!? And how do you know about Will and Jonathan?"

"I wish I could tell you why you shouldn't trust them. But truthfully, I wish I knew them better. That symbol? The lion's head? I don't know what it means but I know it doesn't mean anything good. Every time I bring it up, I'm silenced or I'm told to mind my own business. But you've seen what kind of people wear that pendant! You know what they're like! I really wish I could explain but nobody tells me shit! So don't trust them. Please, this is for your own good."

What the HELL is going on here? Nancy's face creased in frustration. Nina was actually part of the family that introduced the lion's head symbol to Hawkins but she was just as in the dark as Nancy was. Still, knowing that Nina took the time to warn her about the pendant-wearers and her own parents made Nancy feel more comfortable trusting her. There really was no benefit for her to tell her all these things, which meant she did this on her own.

"Well...thanks for the heads up," Nancy said, "I'm Nancy Wheeler by the way. Forgot to say that earlier."

"Sorry that I couldn't be more helpful but still, it's better you know now what to expect from my family rather than later. Also, I already knew your name. I knew about you and Jonathan because I'm friends with William. And...I drew a picture of you two a few days ago. You two are cute together."

"Wait, what now?"

"I like to draw strangers, okay?"

"Hold on, I'm not okay with that-"

Nancy was about to argue but it was too late. Nina ran off, picked up her bike and pedaled away from the scene, disappearing into the night. Nancy sighed and headed home. *Great, that's the second time someone got a picture of me without my permission. And yet, that's the LEAST of my concerns.*

STEVE

Date: First day of school

Time: Night (several hours after leaving the theater)

Location: Harrington residence

Steve Harrington approached his house's front door, feeling as if a great weight was lifted from his chest. Jonathan and Nancy knew he was leaving and accepted it. Although he was sad to leave in general, he was at least glad to know that his two friends had time to process the information. With his mind at ease, Steve finally felt at peace with his decision. That's why when he inserted his key into the door, he realized he was smiling to himself.

Damn it, calm yourself Steve. You're supposed to feel sad right now.

As he turned the key, his thoughts were dashed when he heard a distinct rustle in the bushes behind him. Steve turned around, not sure what to expect.

"Hello?" Steve shouted out. *Great...already made the first mistake that all dumbass teenagers make in horror movies.* "You can't be here, asshole, this is private property. Leave or I'll call the police."

Steve stopped mid-sentence when he saw who it was.

It was a girl. She had long, tangled up hair and was dark-skinned. He assumed she was of some Indian or Middle Eastern descent. The girl looked like she had gone through hell, judging by her tattered up clothes and crestfallen face.

The girl fell on her knees, panting hard. She had been running from something...or someone. On instinct, Steve ran to her and helped the girl to her feet.

"Oh my god, miss, you okay?" Steve said. Holding her in his arms, he realized just how malnourished she was, as if she hadn't been eating properly for at least a few months.

The girl weakly looked at his eyes. "Find...find...find..."

"Find who? Who are you trying to find?"

"Find...find...Jane. Tell her...tell her...she's coming. The redhead. Don't...don't...trust her."

Jane? As in...Jane Hopper? What's going on here? "You're not making any sense. Here, come inside, you need rest and food-"

"Wait! Wait! You need...you need...to be careful. He's coming...he's coming!"

"Who's coming? Who did this to you?"

"...Mister...No...One." At that, the girl passed out in Steve's arms. Steve gently laid her down, making sure he didn't bump her head on the ground.

Mr. No One? What the hell is that? And why did she need me to warn Jane? And who's the redhead? Is she talking about Max? That makes no sense, Max isn't a threat. Or is she? No...that can't be right.

Curious, Steve looked at the girl's arms and began wondering. Knowing Jane's history (thanks to Mike and Hopper's long-winded explanations), only one thing came to his mind. Gingerly, he rolled the girl's sleeves up and looked at her forearms. Just as he suspected, he saw the tattoo.

"008?" Steve said to himself, "Holy shit...who the hell are you?"

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh snap, that encounter though. You thought Nina

was someone you could trust? Well...maybe but who knows? And now, Steve has met Kali! Let's see how this will go in the next few chapters.

P.S. So you know how Mr. No One is based on an 1980s slasher movie villain? Well...Nina's family was inspired by the Addams family. But a darker, less humorous, more evil version of the Addams family. Hopefully you can see the Nina-Wednesday comparisons. Just keep reading, you'll see.

Anyways, if you want, please leave a kudos and a comment! Any feedback is more than welcome! Please let me know what you think of the story so far, it helps with the writing process!

6. Unlikely Allies

Summary for the Chapter:

Murray Bauman makes an unlikely ally, who has classified information that may destroy Jim Hopper's world...

CLASSIFIED REPORT (FROM DR. MARTIN BRENNER OF THE MKULTRA DIVISION)

MEMORANDUM FOR (NAME REDACTED), HEAD OF PROJECT EXPANSION

FROM: DR. MARTIN X. BRENNER, PHD

DATE: JULY 10, 1968

SUBJECT: THE DISASTER AT KHE SANH, MAINLY CONCERNING THE BUELLER-ORVILLE MURDERS; IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF PROJECT MKULTRA AND EXPANSION

As everyone in this program is aware of by now, we are heading into a difficult situation concerning our continued presence in Southeast Asia. Although the chaos in the Khe Sanh territory has died down, it is common knowledge by now that the details of Project Expansion has been leaked to the public. Despite containing the more sensitive details, it is still troubling that the project's existence is now public knowledge. Our first thought was that the details were leaked by a possible whistleblower or a spy from the Soviet Union but it was quickly proven that those situations were not the case. The actual problem stems from a different, unrelated scandal that has unfortunately led to unintended consequences on our end.

According to (name redacted), four U.S. troops stationed in Vietnam have uncovered and exposed a secret drug ring that had been illegally sanctioned by former MACV-SOG field commander Connor O'Reilly, Jr.. Although the names of the troops has been kept

classified to protect their identities, I have uncovered the names for the purpose of determining whether or not they will be a threat to the future of Project MKUltra and Expansion. The troops are;

1) Staff Sergeant Axel Townshend, 5th Infantry Division (**UPDATE AS OF AUGUST 17, 1968: SSgt. Axel Townshend was killed recently in a Viet Cong ambush. As such, he is no longer considered a threat**)

2) Chief Warrant Officer Abraham Bailey, 1st Cavalry Division (**UPDATE AS OF DECEMBER 1, 1979: CWO Abraham Bailey has been terminated as part of Operation Neptune. The official story is that he was an active member of the drug ring he helped expose and was killed in a shootout with a rival gang**)

3) Private Eugene Addison, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (**UPDATE AS OF JUNE 31, 1970: Pvt. Eugene Addison apparently committed suicide-by-soldier during the Cambodian Campaign. The official story is that he ran right into a village run by the Viet Cong. As such, he is no longer considered a threat**)

4) Captain James Hopper, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (**STILL ACTIVE**)

Due to the severity of their allegations, Commander Connor O'Reilly, Jr. was immediately relieved of command and is expected to be court-martialed. An investigation was authorized by the CIA in order to root out any other conspirators that helped O'Reilly in his illegal operation. Among the people who were rooted out were Commander Jordan McKnight (U.S. Marines) and Dr. Hans Fenstermacher, who as you all know was the Nazi biochemist who we had recruited as part of Operation Paperclip. Hans is also one of the project leaders of Project Expansion, which is the main reason for my interest in this drug ring scandal.

Both of these individuals are aware of sensitive details concerning Project MKUltra and Expansion. I personally have worked with Dr. Fenstermacher in regards to developing tests for subjects two, four, eight, eleven, and seventeen and Commander McKnight has been a stalwart supporter of our work. The fact that they have been tied to this unrelated drug ring bust is unfortunate and upsetting for

everyone involved.

We have several options to consider. One option that I would like to discourage would be eliminating the four soldiers who broke the story. For one, they are not aware of Project MKUltra and Expansion. They believe that they are only exposing a drug smuggling operation and any action taken against them will look suspicious on our part. It should be our goal to eliminate suspicion and draw attention elsewhere.

Our best possible option would be to maintain Commander McKnight and Dr. Fenstermacher's innocence and make sure they survive the court proceedings. Hopefully, by successfully defending them in court, they will remain loyal to the program and not expose any details concerning our projects. Worst case scenario would be to eliminate them but let's not make any hasty decisions. It is important to remember that without McKnight, we would not have secured the necessary funding to keep Expansion going and without Fenstermacher's help, Expansion would be years behind on our understanding of the human brain and its potential. I can also vouch for Fenstermacher's loyalty to the program since there have been several instances in the past where he could've leaked the details of the program to the press, but chose not to.

We will need to discuss our options in person. Hopefully we can come to a decision that will result in the least amount of bloodshed.

DETAILS OF PROJECT EXPANSION

*****CLASSIFIED INFORMATION. FOR LEVEL-A
CLEARANCE PERSONNEL ONLY. UNAUTHORIZED VIEWING OF
THE CONTENTS OF THIS FILE IS A FEDERAL
OFFENSE*****

PROJECT LEADERS:

Dr. Martin Brenner, PhD

Dr. Hans Fenstermacher, PhD

Dr. David Ives, PhD (MISSING AS OF SEPTEMBER 17, 1977. LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS WERE IN VIETNAM)

Dr. Violet O'Connor, PhD (ELIMINATED AS OF DECEMBER 3, 1982)

Dr. Shinji Tanaka, PhD (ELIMINATED AS OF JANUARY 1, 1983)

Dr. Amber Nolan, PhD (KILLED BY SUBJECT 011 ON OCTOBER 31, 1982)

KNOWN SUBJECTS:

Upton, Adam (001)

- REDACTED

Greene, Michaela (002)

- REDACTED

Wu, Amy (003)

- REDACTED

Brown, Charlotte (004)

- REDACTED

Redfield, Vanessa (005)

- REDACTED

Reyes, Robbie (006)

- REDACTED

Rachmaninoff, Sasha (007)

- REDACTED

Prasad, Kali (008)

- Abilities: Can create mental hallucinations
- Known family: Sanjay Prasad (father), Sandeep Prasad (mother), Sameer Prasad (brother)

Tozier, Richard (009)

- REDACTED

West, Iris (010)

- REDACTED

Ives, Jane (011)

- Abilities: Advanced form of telekinesis. Extrasensory perception. Can also access pocket dimensions, although this skill is unexplored.
- Known family: Terry Ives (mother), David Ives (father), Millie Ives (half-sister), Becky Ives (aunt)
- NOTE: Take special care of this subject since she is the daughter of project leader David Ives

Nunes, Pedro (012)

- REDACTED

Vallejo, Whitney (013)

- REDACTED

Queen, Quinn (014)

- REDACTED

Ogawa, Sayori (015)

- REDACTED

Mfuni, Johari (016)

- REDACTED

Bartlett, Kira (017)

- Abilities: No known psionic abilities but her muscle memory is near-superhuman. She has mastered several forms of martial arts and other combat techniques in the span of a week.
- Known family: None. Her last living relative was her father, Duncan Bartlett, who died in the Battle of Ia Drang

(there seems to be a few more numbers but the words are too smudged to make out)

MURRAY

Date: August 1985 (few weeks earlier)

Time: 3:00 AM

Location: Parking garage, Sesser, Illinois

"There's more to come if you decide to cooperate."

Murray Bauman took the file from the man's hands and quickly skimmed through it. *Project Expansion? Kids with special abilities? Drug ring bust? Jim Hopper? As in the Hopper from Hawkins, that Hopper? I hit the jackpot!* Bauman kept his cool and placed the folder into the front window seat of his car. His long gamble paid off. He was initially suspicious when he received a call from an unnamed source about exposing the CIA's secret operations in Vietnam but now, he was fully convinced. This was damning evidence. It was always his goal to expose the CIA of their wrongdoings and having these files felt like buying candy at the local mall. Sweet and satisfying.

But what the source never revealed was his reasons for passing along this information to him. At that, Bauman became suspicious. He tapped his fingers on the hood of his car, eyeing the source from head to toe. Something smelled fishy here.

"What's the catch?" Murray asked, "You call me up, say that you believe in my work and that you want to expose the CIA's corruption to the world, but you never said how this would benefit you. Who are you exactly?"

The man shifted a little, a bit uncomfortable. When Bauman looked down to see, he noticed that the man had a prosthetic leg judging by the plastic. He then looked up and noticed the scar tissue underneath the man's chin. Whatever this man went through, it looked like hell.

The man gripped his hands, rubbing his wrist, making Bauman think that his arm was also badly injured as well. "My face is hideous, isn't it?" the man said, catching Murray off-guard, "No worries, I'm not offended. I know what I look like. You wanna know what happened?"

Oh god, is this going to be gross? "What happened?"

"A monster from another dimension attacked me, tore up my face, arms, and chest, and ate my leg. But I survived...miraculously."

Wait a minute...monster from another dimension? Jim Hopper? This man is definitely connected to what happened in Hawkins. Or maybe he actually was there! Maybe his other documents are related to the girl with the psionic abilities.

"Because I survived," the man continued, "Several things happened. I used to be a powerful man in the CIA. But everything crumbled because of what happened in Hawkins and Chicago. Now, I'm a liability. I don't have any friends or allies anymore. It's just me. And being on the run has added several more years to my life. It's really made me think about what I've done these past few decades. All the people I've hurt...all the people I've stepped on...I'm starting to wonder if it really was all worth it."

Putting the pieces together, Murray said, "You're the man behind this file then. You're Martin Brenner."

"Precisely."

"Okay, another question then. If you're a liability, then why expose these documents? Shouldn't you be trying to go for damage control or

something?"

As soon as he said that, Brenner sighed. Something seemed to be troubling him. "I was trying to control the situation two years ago. But I failed. I lost so many good people in trying to fix my mistakes. And the girl who I thought looked up to me as a father...said that I was a bad man. I failed her and her real father. This is my way of making things right. Besides, I'm already deep in the hole when it comes to being on the run from the people I used to work with. Exposing a few more documents wouldn't hurt."

"You didn't really answer my question. Why are you exposing these documents? Surely you have a reason because I don't believe you'd suddenly start regretting what you did. You're not doing this for altruistic reasons."

"You're absolutely right Bauman. So here's the catch, if we're going to work together. I need you to deliver these documents to Jim Hopper in Hawkins. You met him before, I've read your journal-"

"-the fact that you broke into my workspace and read my journal still disturbs me but continue."

"Jim Hopper...he will probably say no but you need to convince him that I'm on his side. Because we have a common enemy."

Uh oh, here comes trouble. "Um...common enemy?"

"I made a lot of enemies since the time I started in the CIA. It's what happens when you step on people to gain power. And it just so happens that one of the various people who wants me dead...is also going after Hopper. I know this because I used to work with him."

"Who is it? Tell me!"

"His name won't ring any bells but it's-"

BANG! BANG!

There were two loud gunshots and all of a sudden, Martin Brenner collapsed on the ground in front of Murray. Murray flipped Brenner over and quickly checked to see if he was okay. *He's still breathing,*

thank god. The bulletproof vest managed to take most of the hit. Murray checked Brenner's face to see if he was still conscious. Unfortunately, either the gunshots or hitting his head on the cement floor knocked the man out cold.

What the hell!? I thought this man said that he had his security team guarding the bottom floors! Where the hell are they-

"Leave him be!" a female voice shouted. Murray looked up. A redhead girl who couldn't be any older than sixteen was approaching him. She had a hunting rifle at hand, which was still smoking. Murray stepped back, not wanting to get involved in this feud.

"Finally found you, you goddamn asshole," the girl shouted as she ejected the spent bullet from the rifle, "Time to pay your debts, papa."

As she raised her rifle at Brenner's head, Brenner coughed and began to wake up. Murray could only watch from the sidelines as the girl kept her rifle aimed at Brenner's head, her finger resting easily on the trigger. She had a look of death on her face.

Brenner opened his eyes and looked right at the girl, instantly recognizing who she was. Weakly, he sat up, his face right at the tip of the rifle. "...Seventeen? Kira? Is that you?"

Angered, Kira Bartlett lowered the rifle and pulled one of her sleeves back. Murray looked at the girl's wrist, noticing the '017' tattoo.

"This is what you did to me, papa," Kira said with venom in her voice, "This tattoo represents all the times you tortured me, humiliated me, and used me like I was some cattle to be poked and prodded! Well, I'll tell you what. You know what I'm gonna do? I'm not just gonna kill you. After I'm done here, I'm gonna go out and kill Eight. Then Eleven. Then everyone else involved. Every scientist, every single one of my sisters and brothers...all of them! Then me! And once I'm dead, every single trace of your legacy will be gone from this Earth. You will die not as a brilliant scientist but as an unaccomplished, pathetic, miserable old man who liked to prey on little boys and girls. That's all you ever will be."

"Excuse me, what the hell is female Rambo talking about?" Murray said, confused at the situation.

Brenner laughed, surprising both Murray and Kira. Still weak, Brenner said, "Kira...Kira Bartlett. Of all my subjects...you may not have been the most impressive. But you were the most improved. No one can fight like you can. I know it doesn't mean much...but I'm proud of you."

Those words somehow pissed Kira off even more and she slapped Brenner hard across the face. Kira then raised her rifle, ready to fire.

Before Murray had a chance to think about what he was going to say, he blurted out, "Wait, don't shoot! I need him for a story! He's going to help me expose and take down the CIA!"

Kira responded with a middle finger. "I don't give a damn what he promised to help you with! This man brutally tortured and killed people for years! He deserves to die!"

"But if he helps me, I can prevent men like him in the future! Please, don't shoot!"

Kira aimed her rifle at Murray and he raised his hands in surrender. *Okay I care about the story but I also care about living until I'm 100. Maybe I shouldn't get myself involved.*

"I told you," the girl growled, "Don't get involved. You mess with me, you mess with this."

"Okay, okay, okay, relax. Just point the gun elsewhere, I don't wanna-"

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Murray thought he had died for a second until he realized that the gunshots were coming from the stairwell. Someone had engaged the bottom floor security team...and the other side was winning. He ducked behind his car as Kira turned her attention to the incoming shooters.

Who the HELL are these guys? Who the hell is that girl? What war did I

get myself involved in!? Murray could only watch as the shooters began storming the parking garage. Earlier, Brenner had bragged about his security team, about how they comprised of high-ranking former soldiers of each branch in the military. Based on the fact that Kira Bartlett managed to sneak past them and that they were being decimated by this opposing force, Murray decided that either Brenner was lying or the people they were going up against were even more highly-skilled.

As Kira put her focus on the new, hostile faction, Brenner managed to recover enough to crawl his way around the car to Murray. Gingerly, Brenner opened the backseat car door and climbed in.

"Get in and drive," Brenner spat out, his mouth covered in blood, "They're after me, not you!"

"Are they with Seventeen?"

"No! Maybe...I don't know! Like I said...many enemies."

Murray nodded and quickly opened the front row set door. He crawled through to the driver's seat and started the car. As he did, Brenner looked up and cursed when he saw the enemy faction's armor.

"Damn 'Defenders'," Brenner whispered, "I should've known they were the ones going after me."

"'Defenders'?" Murray asked. He couldn't help it. "What's 'Defenders'?"

"I'll explain on the way, just get me out of here!"

Murray wasted no time. He pulled off the brakes and backed up as far away from the fighting as he could. A few gunshots whizzed in his direction and he saw that it was Kira firing at him. As he made his way down to the ramp, Kira turned her attention to the Defenders troops. Looking at the rear view mirror, Murray saw the girl gun down three soldiers before leaving his sight.

Murray ran past the toll gate. There was no time to stop and pay, he had to keep moving. As he drove down the street, he saw what remained of Brenner's security team. None of them were left and if

there were any survivors, they were probably taken care of by now. His spine shivered at the thought. Police sirens started ringing out and Murray drove away from the sounds. He couldn't go home now, not when the streets were this hot. He headed for the freeway, planning to leave town for a bit.

"Bauman," Brenner said, his voice strained, "I think my lung's punctured. You need to find a place for us to rest."

"I can't take you to the hospital! Besides, weren't you wearing the vest-"

"-vest caught the bullet but the force cracked my rib. Help me and I'll tell you everything you need to know. About Jim Hopper, about Defenders, about who I am and what I've done."

I'm so going to regret this in the future. Bauman sighed as he continued forward. He knew of a motel on the way to Hawkins. He would stop there for a few days to help Brenner through his injury. Now that he was this far into this conspiracy with people gunning for his head, there was no point in turning back.

JOYCE

Date: August 1985 (first day of school)

Time: Night (around the time Steve encountered Kali and Nancy encountered Nina and Lester)

Location: Byers residence

DING DONG

"Mom, can you get that?" Will shouted out from his room. Joyce sighed in frustration. She was about to go to sleep and the last thing she needed was someone bothering her in the middle of the night. Not wanting to answer the door, she knocked on Jonathan's door to see if he was busy.

"Sorry mom, working on my portfolio," Joyce heard him say through the door. *Why are my two sons such lazy boneheads?*

"Fine, I got it," Joyce grumbled, "I make you two your favorite soup and this is how you repay me?"

"We love you!" both Jonathan and Will said simultaneously. Joyce rolled her eyes as she headed to the door. Whoever it was, she was going to give them a piece of her mind. Joyce opened the door and immediately dropped any shouting she had planned on doing. Standing in front of her was a man with a thick beard who looked like he had just gone through hell. His glasses were broken, with one lense that had something that looked suspiciously like a bullet hole. His clothes were tattered, his boots were caked with mud, and he was breathing heavily. When Joyce looked behind the man, she noticed that his car was riddled with bullets. The windshield had been cracked and one of the wheels was flat.

Joyce immediately stepped back into the house and pulled the rifle that Will usually kept in the shed. After the chaos of the past two years, she was no longer taking any chances. The gun stayed in the house, right where anyone in the family could easily access it.

"Whoa, miss, wait," the man shouted, "I've been on the road for a really long time, dodging the government and their thugs for weeks now! I know that sounds ridiculous but it's the truth! Now, I have urgent news to deliver! Please, do you know Jim Hopper? I have to talk to him!"

Hopper? Who the hell is this guy? Joyce put a bullet into the rifle and aimed it right at the man's head. Jonathan and Will had stepped out at this point, shocked at what was happening.

"Mom, what are you doing?" Will asked innocently.

"Stay back Will, I got this," Joyce shouted back. The man tried to take a step forward but Joyce forced him to take a step back by aiming the rifle right at the man's mouth.

Joyce saw the man's glasses and car, that's all she needed to see to know that the man was dangerous. "Get off of my damn property,

right now."

"Wait, please, just listen! I need to talk to Jim Hopper! He needs to know-"

"-know what?"

"-that he's in danger! And that his daughter did not develop cancer on her own! She was murdered by the CIA!"

At that, Joyce could've sworn she heard ringing sounds. She lowered the rifle, not sure if she was processing this new information correctly. *Murder? By the CIA? If this man is right...then we're about to walk into something insidious here.*

Notes for the Chapter:

Brenner's back! And he might be a GOOD GUY?! And Kira is 017! How will this tie back to the main plot? Well, gotta keep reading to find out!

P.S. I'm a huge Resident Evil fan so writing out those classified files were a blast.

Anyways, if you want, please leave a kudos and a comment! Any feedback is more than welcome! Please let me know what you think of the story so far, it helps with the writing process!

7. History Repeats

Summary for the Chapter:

Lucas Sinclair and Mike Wheeler encounter Estelle, who recently ran away from home. From Estelle, the two of them learn that even though the gate has been closed, their ordeal with the Upside Down is not over...

LUCAS I

Date: First day of school

Time: Afternoon (school day ended)

Location: Sinclair family home

A few hours earlier...

"Well, that was day one," Lucas said, "I'm headed home, I can't do D&D tonight. Gotta watch Erica and the parents don't want me out late on the first day of school."

"Same here," Dustin said as he bit into an apple he saved from lunch, "I'm actually hanging out with Jane tonight. And that new girl, Kira."

"Can't believe you befriended the one girl who everyone told us to stay away from-"

"-Kira Bartlett is a sweet, misunderstood human being! Everyone just needs to get to know her better. Jane is trying. You saw the two of them, they got along just fine in their first day together."

"I guess. What about you, Will? What's your reason that you can't hang out tonight?"

Will pondered the question as he played around with a torn-up eraser. "Well, it's kinda weird but I'm getting to know the other new girl, Nina"

Huang. I invited her over so we could draw for a bit. I know that it sounds kinda boring but we both love drawing. I'd invite everyone to join but Nina is a little...shy? No, that's not the word. She has some kind of anxiety or something. So no guests."

"Wow, look at you," Lucas said, "Making friends on your own. No more Mike Wheeler approaching you on the playground."

"Ha, very funny. Oh, and speaking for Mike since he's currently away doing mushy-gushy romance stuff with Jane, he told me that he's actually free tonight. I feel kinda bad for him though."

"Why?" Dustin asked.

"The three of us can't hang out tonight. And according to Jonathan, things aren't going well in the Wheeler house. Karen is in her own world while Ted just doesn't care. I kinda feel like we're Mike's escape from the bad side of his home life so I feel that we're letting him down by not coming over."

"Well...I can see that," Lucas said, "But Mike will be fine on his own. Remember, this is the guy who talked to Jane for 353 days straight. If he can handle that kind of misery, he can handle anything."

"Mom, dad, I'm home!"

Lucas Sinclair dropped his backpack to the ground and walked over to the kitchen to get a snack. Feeling a bit queasy from lunch food (he absolutely hated the unhealthy food that was served at Hawkins High), Lucas settled on an apple. The house was quiet, save for the sounds of him biting into the apple.

It didn't surprise him that he was home alone. His mom was applying for a job as a secretary at the newly built private military company in downtown Hawkins. *Defenders? I think that's what they were called. Max should know, it's her parents' business. Wait, mother and stepfather. Gotta get those labels correct.* Meanwhile, his dad was at work, doing his rounds as a park ranger. Erica was also out, going through the after school learning program that her parents placed her in.

Just me and my lonesome, I guess. Lucas sighed as he headed to his room to grab the walkie-talkie. He wondered who was free to talk right now. Both Dustin and Will were apparently busy with their own lives. Mike was probably the one most free to talk but Lucas was sure that he was hanging out with El, doing couple things. Part of him wouldn't be surprised if Dustin revealed that he was hanging out with Kira, Jane...and Mike. Moving beyond them, Lucas wouldn't mind calling Max and seeing if she was free to do couple stuff but then he remembered that she had her other things to attend to. Something about joining the women's volleyball team or something.

Screw it, Dustin and Will should have their walkie-talkies on them. It's not like they'll be talking to Kira and Nina nonstop, they'll need breaks from each other eventually. I just need someone to talk to right now to make this boredom bearable. With those two in mind, Lucas opened the door to his room...and shut it immediately.

There was a loud yelp and Lucas shielded his eyes immediately when he saw the silver-haired girl changing in his room. She was a complete stranger but at this point, Lucas was more scared that he walked in on a woman changing. Truth be told, he barely saw anything. The memory was already a blur but the fact that he saw more skin on a person than any instance before was making Lucas nervous.

"Sorry, sorry," Lucas shouted, "I didn't see anything, I promise!" *Wait a minute...why am I apologizing? This is MY house.* Lucas knocked on the door loudly. "Hey, you can't be in this house! Leave now or I'll call the cops!"

"Wait, please! Don't!" Lucas could hear the girl rush towards the door and open it slightly. He saw her eyes and felt a chill down his spine when he noticed that her eyes were a dark shade of red. *Silver hair, dark red eyes...she looks like a D&D character.* Thankfully, the girl was fully dressed but Lucas couldn't help but notice that she was in his clothes. His pants, his shirt, his jacket. The same jacket he wore two years ago, when he first met Eleven.

"Please don't call the cops on me," the girl frantically pleaded, "My name is Estelle, I just needed a place to stay for a little bit-"

"-then go home! Or something, I don't know! Just don't break into other people's houses! That's against the law!"

"I know, I know! But please, let me stay for a bit. At least let me rest, I haven't had any rest."

The girl didn't seem to be a threat but Lucas didn't want to take any chances. He pushed the door open and the girl backed up, terrified. She looked like she was about to cry. Just the sight of her in distress made him immediately regret his move since it came out more harsh than he intended. Lucas held out a hand to signal that he meant no harm but the girl backed up regardless.

"Sorry about that," Lucas said, "I didn't mean to be so...harsh. But what you're doing is really uncool. You can't just be sneaking into people's houses like this!"

"I'm sorry, okay! I just...I don't have anywhere to go!"

"What's wrong with just going home-"

"I can't go home! Look, I know this will sound really suspicious but I ran away from home. My dad probably hates me by now! And I can't stop thinking about this place! Please, don't make me leave Hawkins. I need to know first."

Know what? I'm getting nowhere with this girl. "Know what, exactly?"

Estelle, who was already in panic mode, seem to be triggered by Lucas' question. She stepped away, going back to the spot where she was changing. Lucas watched as she pulled a binder from her backpack and opened it. What Lucas saw caught him by surprise.

The drawing was crude but effective. It was a perfect recreation of the Upside Down gate. Even though it was just a drawing, Lucas could vividly imagine the monsters emerging from the gate and all the innocent personnel that they were killing. Now Lucas was the one taking a step back as all the horrible memories came rushing back to him.

"How do you know about that?" Lucas asked as the girl put the binder away. Estelle shrugged, not knowing the answer.

"I see this thing in my dreams every night," Estelle said, taking a seat on the bed as she did, "It's not the same dream. Sometimes, the dreams are happy. Sometimes they're sad. But it's the same location and same purpose each time. Doesn't matter where my dream is at, as soon as this thing shows up, monsters come through. Every. Single. Time. But why!?! This makes no sense!"

Lucas had a hard time processing all of this. He sat down on the bed next to Estelle, scanning the picture to see if he missed any details. As he continued to look at the dreaded gate to the Upside Down, the girl inched closer to him on the bed, curious at his reaction.

"You know what this is, don't you?" Estelle whispered, "Your face is giving it away. What can you tell me about this? Please, I have to know."

Oh god, I'm being put on the spot here. Think of something, Lucas...think! Hmm...maybe pull a lifeline?

"Um...I need to make a call. Be right back." Lucas grabbed his walkie talkie and began contacting the other party members. He wasn't sure how to describe the situation but he was definitely going to need some help with Estelle.

Before Lucas could call in for Max, Estelle stood up from the bed and "Don't make it an emergency, please!" Estelle said.

"Why not?"

"Because, I don't want to cause a scene. Just tell them you want to hang out. You can tell them it's an emergency later!"

"But this is about the Upside Down. You weren't here for the past two years so anything to do with the Upside Down is going to be an emergency-"

"-I'm just looking for answers, okay? I'm not asking anyone to destroy a monster, blow something up, or save a child. Please, I don't want to blow all of this out of proportions and I'm pretty sure some of your friends might be busy with something else. Do you really wanna bother them with this? Please, just do what I say. For me?"

Lucas facepalmed. With the combination of him feeling bad for snapping at her earlier and the fact that there really was no present threat, Lucas formed a much different, less urgent message than he intended.

LUCAS II

Max: "Sorry Lukey...dad needs me to find Billy again. Maybe we'll hang out tomorrow?"

Dustin: "I'd love to hang out but I'm still hanging out with Kira and Jane. We're at the Palace right now and I just beat the high score on Space Invaders! Kira is new here so I thought I'd-hey, shut up, I don't like her like that!"

Will: "Lucas, this might sound weird but...I'm actually a little busy right now. You know that new girl, Nina Huang? Well, we actually are hanging out. I gotta say, she's an amazing artist and keeps throwing out all these amazing things we could work on at her family's mansion. Sculpting, making glass, and some other cool stuff. Maybe tomorrow?"

Jane: "Oh my god, is this how you use this thing? Oh, it's working? Okay...um...hi Lucas? I can't hang out right now, I was invited by some of the popular girls in my class for...donuts? Also, that new girl Kira will be there. And Dustin too, I guess. I think he likes Kira. Dad says I need to make more friends who are girls so I have to do this. Tomorrow?"

Mike: "Yeah, sure, I can come over. Jane is having a girl's day out so I'm free. Yes, Lucas, I really am free."

Of all of his friends, Mike was the last person he expected to be free right now. Still, one out of five was better than zero. Lucas and Estelle then moved to the living room, waiting for Mike's arrival. As they waited, Lucas turned on the TV and began watching while Estelle started doodling in her binder.

"So...this Mike person," Estelle started, "He also knows about the Upside Down?"

"We all do. Every person who I contacted has either seen or knows about the gate."

"What's Mike's relation to it? If you don't mind me asking."

"He's dating the girl who created the gate in the first place." At that, Estelle didn't ask anymore questions about Mike and the rest of the AV club.

Two hours passed. Getting worried, Lucas stood up and messaged for Mike on his walkie talkie. As he did, he heard the front door open. Lucas ran to it, ready to dive headfirst into this argument over the Upside Down until he saw who it actually was. Lucas didn't have time to warn Estelle to hide as Erica Sinclair entered the house.

"Lukey, Miss Potts told me that mom and dad will be attending her book club tonight so you have to babysit me-" Erica Sinclair stopped mid-sentence when she saw Estelle waving at her.

"Hello," Estelle said, "I'm Estelle. And you are?"

Erica turned to Lucas, who could only look at her and shrug. *Well...shit. This has got to be the worst possible scenario.*

"Lukey?" Erica said calmly, "Can I ask you something?"

"What?" Lucas said cautiously.

"Have you no shame? Do you not respect women?"

"What?! What gave you that impression-"

"-you haven't even hit your one-year anniversary with Max and you're already cheating on her!"

Ooooh boy. She did not just accuse me of that! Lucas stifled a yell and paced around the room to calm himself. As he did, he, Erica, and Estelle heard another knock on the door. Erica snickered as she walked back to the door to answer it.

"Wow, Lukey, are you going to disappoint your family again with your next guest?" she said with a wide grin, "Or maybe this is Max

and this was your way of breaking up with her-"

"-Erica, I swear to god, this is not what it looks like-"

"-who is Max?" Estelle interrupted, "Are you two dating?"

Lucas turned his full attention to Estelle as Erica opened the door.
"None of your business, okay!"

"Oh, so it is the one you're dating. If it's the redhead girl you have a picture of in your room, then I must say...she is very beautiful. You're very lucky."

As Estelle said that, Lucas saw that it was Mike Wheeler who entered the house. He caught the last part of Estelle's sentence and turned to her. "Wait, who are you and why were you in Lucas' room-"

"-oh, she was in your room!" Erica interrupted, "Lucas, you have disappointed me again! I mean, you were always a disappointment but-"

"-Erica, shut up!" Lucas shouted, "Okay, Mike, Erica, here is what happened! I came home. Estelle was in my room. She broke in! I did not invite her, I repeat, I did not invite her! This is literally the first day I've met her. Mike, the reason why I called you over is because of this!" At that, Lucas grabbed Estelle's drawing of the Upside Down and showed it to Mike. Mike took it and gasped when he realized what it was.

"Did Will draw this?" Mike asked sincerely. Lucas shook his head for no. Although he didn't want anymore harm to fall on Will, it seemed like anything to do with the Upside Down centered around him. For the first time, this had nothing to do with Will and that fact terrified Lucas even more.

Lucas pointed at Estelle. "She did. I swear to god, she broke into my house and showed me the drawing. She said she wants to know more about the Upside Down and I told her, I don't know-"

"The Upside Down?" Estelle interrupted, "Is that what you call it?" Lucas, Mike, and Erica turned to the girl, who had stood up and approached them. She grabbed the drawing from them and stared at

it, trying to make sense of her own imagination.

"You referred to it as the Upside Down earlier," she continued, "I didn't think much about it but now...I remember my dad mentioning something about the Upside Down when I first moved in with him."

"Who's your dad?" Lucas asked, afraid of the answer.

"Dr. Sam Owens. Well, he's not my real dad, he adopted me. I don't know who my real father is." Lucas and Mike looked at each other, shocked. Mike mouthed, 'She's Owens' daughter? He never mentioned having a daughter', to which Lucas shrugged. He was just as in the dark as he was.

Mike turned to Estelle with an inquisitive look on his face. "How did your dad mention the Upside Down? What was the context?"

Estelle turned to him, her face grim, as if she were unsure about the answer. Then, without hesitation, she said, "He was talking to some coworkers about it. I don't remember what he was asked but I heard him say that I came from the Upside Down. Do you two know what that means?"

Mike and Lucas immediately stepped back. Estelle, frightened by their response, stepped back as well, bumping into a lamp as she did. Erica, sensing a possible danger, ran into the kitchen and grabbed the phone to call the cops.

"Lucas, is that a bad thing? I'm calling the cops-"

"-Erica, wait, don't! Don't do anything too rash!"

"Guys, what's going on?" Estelle asked, frantically, "What am I? Talk to me, please!" Lucas didn't know what to do. If what this girl was saying was true, then she was a threat, no question about it. She may not be a Demogorgon or a Mind Flayer but after two years of dealing with the Upside Down, he wasn't about to take any chances. He grabbed the walkie talkie and called the first person he could think of.

"Jane? Jane? It's Lucas, I need you to come over to my house right now, it's urgent-"

"-DON'T, PLEASE!" SVASH-CRACK

Lucas, Mike, and Erica yelled when all the lights in the house died out. Lucas' walkie talkie snapped in half while the home phone nearly disintegrated right before Erica could dial 9. Mike's own walkie talkie began sparking out of control and he tossed it to the ground to avoid catching on fire. The microwave then burst open and fizzled as well, showering the kitchen in hot sparks. Luckily, nothing caught on fire, although Lucas wondered why the fire alarm didn't go off. That's when he realized the alarm was destroyed as well.

This was unlike El's tantrums. While El's tantrums felt like a strong, neutral force, Lucas, Mike, and Erica all felt something...negative in the air. It was as if someone had done something to change the environment in order to affect everyone's moods. Lucas himself felt disgusting and unclean after Estelle's tantrum, which deeply disturbed him.

As the three of them wondered what just happened, they turned to Estelle, who was just as confused as they were. Looking at her hands, she said, "That's never happened before. I've never...I didn't...I didn't know I could do that-"

"-who the hell are you?" Lucas said.

"I don't know anymore! If I really am from the Upside Down...what does that make me? I need to know. Please. Someone, tell me! What am I!?"

"A monster," Mike said. Lucas saw the immediate regret on his face as Mike covered his mouth. Both boys immediately felt guilty when they saw Estelle start crying, her eyes becoming a light shade of pink, which somehow accentuated her dark, red irises. Before Mike could apologize, Estelle stood up and exited the house, running towards downtown. Mike and Lucas stood up and began following her.

On the way out, Lucas punched Mike on the arm. "Damn it, why did you call her a monster!"

"It slipped out, Lucas, it was in the heat of the moment!"

"Wait," Erica shouted as she stepped out with them, "I can't be home alone-"

"-just stay inside, I'll be back as soon as possible," Lucas shouted back.

"Lucas, don't leave me-"

"-then come follow me, damn it! We can't lose Estelle!"

Erica rolled her eyes as she followed her brother and Michael to downtown Hawkins.

LUCAS III

Date: First day of school

Time: Around 6:00 PM

Location: Downtown Hawkins

"Well, lookie what we got here. A new kid! Let's properly introduce her to Hawkins!"

Lucas cursed silently when he saw who it was that Estelle ran into. Two familiar faces; the schoolyard bullies, Troy and James. It felt like things hadn't changed even though Mike and Lucas haven't been bullied by the troublesome duo for nearly a year now. Although in this instance, they were more worried for the bullies than Estelle, now that they knew what Estelle could do.

Troy tussled Estelle's hair and she moved away, frowning as she did. "Who are you, new kid? Never seen someone with silver hair and red eyes. You look like a freak. Or did you dye your hair and put on red contact lenses? Are you one of those faggots who enjoys dressing up like that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Estelle answered angrily, "Now leave me alone, I don't wanna be bothered right now."

Estelle tried to move past Troy but the bully moved in front of her, with James helping. Estelle sighed and backed away as Troy and James moved closer to her. Without a clear opening, Lucas stepped up from where he was watching and approached the group. Mike followed while Erica stood back and watched.

Troy mockingly clapped as Lucas and Mike approached to help Estelle. "Well, today just got better. It's midnight and frogface! Long time no see."

"Shut up, Troy," Lucas said, gritting his teeth in anger, "We're just here to get our friend back." Lucas could've sworn he saw Estelle's face light up when he called her 'friend'. He chose to ignore that for now.

"So freakshow bitch is with you then," Troy continued, "Should've known. Why is it that weirdo girls are attracted to your loser group? First, it was that bald psycho, now it's silver-haired girl."

"At least girls actually want to be around us, unlike you!"

"You keep telling yourself that, chocolate boy! And besides, why would I be jealous when the only girls who gravitate toward you are the ugly, monster kind? I guess freaks really do gravitate towards each other-"

"-okay, that's enough!" Estelle shouted, "Seriously, you're the most immature little shit I've ever met. Why don't you do something useful with your life, instead of tormenting other people for no reason. Here's an idea; do your dick-measuring contest somewhere else with other screw-ups like you...with people who actually give a shit about what you have to say."

Damn. Damn, damn, damn, damn, DAMN. Girl went in on Troy! Lucas turned to Mike, who was just as awestruck as he was. Turning to Erica, he could see her fist bump in the distance. As time ticked by, Lucas could feel the tension in the air as Troy put his full attention on Estelle. His face was red with anger, a face that Lucas and Mike were unfortunately well acquainted with.

Estelle was unfazed by Troy's anger. James, who recognized the face,

placed his hand on Troy's shoulder, hoping to calm him down. You didn't need to be a rocket scientist to know that his simple gesture wasn't working. "Are you still in there, trogolodyte?" Estelle said, her tone starting to sound mocking, "Anything you wanna say? Seriously...try it. Because I don't wanna hear you disrespect Lucas and Mike anymore."

"You have no right to talk to me that way," Troy said, his tone suddenly serious and grim. Mike clenched his fist, recognizing that tone. Lucas wasn't there but he was fully aware of what happened at the quarry two years ago. Mike jumped to save Dustin and El stopped him in mid-air. She pushed Troy and James back and made sure they never bullied the group ever again. Unfortunately, the harshness in Troy's voice when he ordered Mike to jump off a cliff was there again when he threatened Estelle just now. Right now, both boys wished El was here but with no walkie-talkies and phones, they were cut off from the rest of the group.

"Troy, let's calm down here," Mike said. James agreed, surprisingly, and said, "Come on, man, it's a girl. You can't cross that line-"

"-I don't care that she's a girl, no one speaks to me that way!" Troy shouted, shoving James off of him. The sudden push caused James to trip on the sidewalk and he landed on his back, hitting the pavement hard. Estelle immediately rushed to James while Mike and Lucas ran up to Troy. Things were going too far.

"How could you shove him like that!?" Estelle shouted, "Have you no decency!?"

"No. One. Talks. To. Me. That. Way!" Troy shouted right into Estelle's face. Lucas, thinking quickly, pulled Troy away from Estelle, hoping to pull the man as far away from her as possible. Instead, Troy quickly broke Lucas' grip and retaliated. Lucas didn't see it coming. Just one quick jab and a sharp, sudden pain on his chin and he fell to the ground, nearly out from the single punch. Mike's cries sounded muddled as Lucas tried to reorient himself. Erica ran over, looking concerned as she tried to help him to his feet.

"You goddamn asshole!" Mike shouted, shoving Troy as he did, "Why did you punch?!"

SWOOSH! Another punch. This time, Lucas saw Mike barely dodge it. Troy pushed Mike back and the two of them butted heads, trying to shove the other one down. Estelle ran in to try to break the two apart.

"Stop it," she shouted, "You two need to stop fighting! There's no reason-" Estelle managed to pry the two apart but a stray punch from Troy that was meant for Mike ended up connecting to Estelle's face. She landed on the ground next to Lucas, immediately crying from the impact.

"Estelle, oh my god!" Mike shouted as he ran to her side, helping her up as he did. Troy, who looked guilty for once, took a step back.

"I...I didn't mean to," Troy said, trying to catch his breath, "I wasn't...I would never hit a girl-"

"-well you did, asshole!" Mike shouted, "I hope you're proud of yourself. You got what you wanted. You're the man and anyone who disagrees gets hit in the face. We got it! Now leave!"

Lucas expected an angry comeback from Troy. Instead, he ran over to James and helped him to his feet. The two bullies made their way down the street, away from Lucas, Mike, Erica, and Estelle.

Well...at least that's over. Lucas sighed as he gripped his sore jaw. They were humiliated but at least Troy and James were nowhere to be seen. *I should feel good about this. But why does it feel like something bad is about to happen? Oh no...it's happening again. Does Mike feel it too?*

Lucas turned to Mike who was already looking at him. "You feel that?" Lucas asked.

Mike nodded for 'yes'. "The bad feeling we got after all the electronics at your house blew up? Yeah."

"What does that mean-"

CRASH! Lucas immediately turned his head to the direction of the crash. *No...no...oh my god, what just happened?* Further down the street, Lucas saw a stranger exit their car in the middle of the road. They had a look of extreme guilt, which Lucas assumed meant that

they had run someone or something over. When Lucas followed the stranger, he realized that it was Troy and James that they ran over. Lucas couldn't tell if the two bullies were still alive but he prayed to god that they were.

"That's Troy and James," Lucas said, "That can't just be a coincidence, right? We feel the bad wave for one second and the next thing we know, they get hit. Estelle, what are you doing?"

Estelle looked at him with panic in her eyes. "Lucas, I swear, I don't know what's happening. I'm just as scared as you-"

"-we felt the same negative energy from earlier and all of a sudden, Troy and James get hit by a car," Mike interrupted, "You need to start giving us some answers."

Estelle stood up and began walking away. "I already told you, I don't know! I don't know what's happening or if I'm even causing this! Stop blaming me for something out of my control-"

"-you broke into Lucas' house with a picture of the Upside Down! I'm sorry but how can I NOT be suspicious of you?"

"And you also said that you dream about the Upside Down and that Dr. Owens is your dad," Lucas added, "That's three red flags too many. Any one of those facts alone would be enough of a red flag!"

"I...I...I can't be here. Dad was right, I shouldn't have left home. I'm sorry, I gotta go."

Estelle turned to run. This time, Mike caught up to her and grabbed her by the wrist. The last thing Lucas heard him say was, "Estelle, stop," before he stopped completely, as if he lost track of where he was.

MIKE

Date: First day of school

Time: Around 6:00 PM

Location: Downtown Hawkins The Upside Down

"ESTELLE, STOP!"

Mike opened his eyes and saw that Lucas and Estelle were gone. He was still in downtown Hawkins but the environment was different. Everything was darker, the plants were rotten, and ash was floating all around him. The ground was...sticky and for some reason, the air was odorless. It took him only a few seconds to realize where he was.

The Upside Down.

His breath started to quicken as panic settled in. *This can't be right. I shouldn't be here. The gate was closed! I can't...this isn't possible!* As he began walking around, he did the only thing he could think of. He started calling for help, knowing that there was no one here to help him.

"LUCAS! ESTELLE! ERICA! JANE! WILL! NANCY! Come on, someone out there talk to me! Please! Guys!?"

There was a loud rumbling sound behind him. Mike turned around, fearing that it was the Mind Flayer. Instead, he saw...he wasn't entirely sure what he saw. A woman in a white dress. Her hair reached down to her feet and was covering her face. Her feet were badly bruised, reminding Mike of a ballerina's feet after dancing. The woman was muttering nonsense to herself as she slowly approached Mike.

"Hello?" Mike said, cautious of the woman. Suddenly, the woman stopped talking and looked at Mike. With her hair covering her face, he couldn't tell what the woman was planning on doing. Before he had a chance to ask again, the woman pointed at him. Her arm was extremely rotten, with several air bubbles forming under the skin.

"My daughter," the woman said. Her voice sounded...unnatural. Mike shivered when he heard the woman's voice. "Give me back my daughter."

"Um, who are you talking about-"

"-MY DAUGHTER. YOU SEALED HER AWAY FROM ME. GIVE HER BACK. OPEN THE GATE AGAIN!"

The woman pulled back her hair and Mike screamed when he saw that she had no face. She was somehow talking but had no mouth to speak. The woman didn't move any closer but she kept shouting the same thing over and over. Mike began to step backwards and as he did, he saw it. Rising in the distance, a gigantic monstrosity rose and towered over him and the faceless woman. He had seen the creature before, but only in Will's drawings.

So that's what the Mind Flayer looks like in person. Holy shit-

"-OPEN THE GATE AGAIN!" Mike looked away from the Mind Flayer for a quick second and found himself face-to-face with the faceless woman. She grabbed him by the shoulders and held him steady. Mike could only scream as the woman stared at him with her blank face.

"THE GATE, THE GATE, THE GATE, THE GATE, THE GATE, THE GATE, THE GATE-"

"-MIKE!"

Mike heard his name again and suddenly, he was back in the real world. Lucas, Erica, and Estelle were watching him, making sure he was okay. He was breathing heavily and felt the urge to vomit.

"Mike, you okay?" Lucas asked, "You scared us for a sec there-"

"-I was there, Lucas," Mike said, "I was there. In the Upside Down."

Lucas eyed him carefully. He looked both concerned and confused. "That's impossible, the gate's closed. El closed it, Will hasn't had an episode since then, there hasn't been an attack in months-"

"-Lucas! Just hear me out. I was there! It was real! I saw the Mind Flayer!"

Erica, who was confused by the entire situation, looked at Estelle. "What did you do to Mike?" she asked. At that, Lucas and Mike turned to Estelle, hoping to get an answer. Estelle just shrugged.

"Well, whoever you are," Mike continued, "It seems like you can actually access the Upside Down without the gate. I don't have to guess, I know you can do this. I was just there. You really might be from the Upside Down."

"Does that make me a monster?" Estelle asked.

"...I don't know. We'll see."

Notes for the Chapter:

Hmm...the middle schoolers encountering a strange girl with a mysterious past. Sound familiar? Anyways, we now have all our main players introduced and everyone has gathered in Hawkins. Defenders PMC, Kira, Mr. No One, the Huang family, and Estelle. From here on out, the various subplots will start coming together.

P.S. I felt bad for not including a Lucas POV chapter in previous chapters, so I dedicated most of chapter six to him. No disrespect to the Lucas character, I just couldn't justify having a POV for him earlier. This is my way of making up for that.

Anyways, if you want, please leave a kudos and a comment! Any feedback is more than welcome! Please let me know what you think of the story so far, it helps with the writing process!

8. Cold Confrontation

Summary for the Chapter:

The first day of school from Eleven's eyes. As this is happening, a series of events occur that will set our heroes on their next journey...

ELEVEN

Date: First day of school

Time: Around lunchtime

Location: Hawkins High School

A few hours earlier...

"Hey kid, have fun at your first day of school," Hopper said as Jane stepped out of truck. She turned to him, a smile pasted on her face as she waved him goodbye.

"I'll try!" Jane chirped.

"Make more female friends, okay! Girl your age, you should be hanging out with the other girls in your class."

"Okay dad, I'll try my best."

"And if anyone makes you feel uncomfortable, you let me know and I'll kick their ass."

"But everyone here is my age. You can't beat up high schoolers!"

"Fine. I'll kick their dad's ass."

"Go to work, dad."

"Alright, see you in a bit, kiddo."

As the bell rang for lunch, Jane let out a sigh of relief as she exited the classroom. Her first day of school was going relatively well, judging by how her first four classes went, but it didn't stop her from feeling nervous. Luckily, all the tutoring paid off so that she didn't make a fool of herself in class but just the thought of being called on gave her anxiety.

"Miss Hopper, tell us about yourself," her first period Algebra 1 teacher, Miss Victoria Gardner, said to her. Jane had said the basics but when asked about her relationship to Jim Hopper and why he never mentioned having a daughter, Jane could only shrug. Most of the class seemed to ignore her but Jane couldn't help but feel the stares.

Her other three classes went the same way. In her second period American History class, she lied and said that Hopper was no longer in contact with her mom. In her third period Spanish 1 class, she said that she needed permission from her dad to tell any stories about the family. And in her fourth period English 1 class, she was saved by her teacher's lack of interest.

Aside from dealing with the question of her relation to Chief Hopper, bonding with her fellow classmates was also a struggle. Just based on the first day, Jane was overall mixed towards mingling with the other high schoolers. There were the good ones, such as sophomore Arturo Godinez in her Spanish 1 class who helped her with her pronunciation. But then there were the bad ones, such as Miranda Brown in her American History class who made fun of her for dating Mike Wheeler. Apparently, being a "nerd" or even dating a "nerd" was looked down upon.

Hey universe, can I get more Arturos, less Mirandas, please? And where the hell are my friends!? This day would be so much better if I wasn't on my own.

"Hey Jane," a voice rang behind her. She sighed in relief when she instantly recognized it as Will, who caught up to her with books in his hand. The two started walking to the cafeteria side-by-side, trying to avoid the crowd of people bustling around them.

"How's the first day going," Will asked, "I can't believe I got P.E. first period. Too early for that kind of stuff."

Jane nodded her head, not sure how to respond to him since she wasn't familiar with his concerns. "It was good. I learned a lot." It was true, she really was learning. However, she preferred the intimate space of her tutoring sessions. Being around a crowd of people, all vying for the teacher's attention, didn't sit right with her. Suddenly, the gang's complaining about school and schoolwork started to make sense to her.

"Spanish sounds fun," Will continued, "I was going to take it but Jonathan insisted I take German since he could help me out. But he's moving to Indianapolis in a few weeks so it doesn't even matter! I should've just gone for Spanish."

"It's a bit hard. Learning another language is tough. I think I like English the most." Eleven smiled to herself since she didn't want to tell Will that the reason why she preferred English was that it reminded her of the tutoring sessions. It definitely did not have to do with the fact that her English teacher looked like a female version of Chief Hopper.

"English is cool, I guess. Way better than Chemistry. I have Mike and Max in my Chemistry class and we're all already bored."

"What did you discuss?"

"The syllabus." Will chuckled as Jane playfully pushed him for complaining on his first day of school.

As they continued walking, Lucas, Dustin, and Max joined, with Mike joining last. Smiling, she moved from Will to Mike and Mike placed his arm behind her back so that they could walk closely together. The group giggled at this, although Lucas followed suit by placing his arm behind Max's back. Dustin and Will rolled their eyes at the couples as they entered the cafeteria. The room was packed full of students, with the lunch line going out the main door and into the lot.

Wow, I didn't know there was this many students at the school. Jane took a deep breath, trying her best not to let her anxiety show. Mike led

the group to an open table and everyone sat down to eat their respective lunches (excluding Dustin and Will, who had to get their food from the lunch ladies). Jane bit into her ham-and-cheese sandwich that Hopper prepared for her as she kept watch of her surroundings. There was a lot of noise in the room but nothing she couldn't manage. Truth be told, she enjoyed the loudness of the cafeteria. It was definitely more bearable than the cold, empty silence of being locked in her room, alone to her thoughts. She definitely didn't miss the days of being Brenner's lab rat.

"Is it always this busy?" Jane asked. Mike nodded as he dug into his chocolate pudding cup.

"Usually," Mike said, "If it's too loud, we can always eat outside--"

"-no, no, it's fine! I don't want to bother anyone! We can eat here."

"Really," Max said, "I was hoping you would say yes to going outside. I hate it in here. Smells like...sweaty athletes and day old pizza."

"Wow, so the gym where the athletes train in...smells like sweaty athletes," Dustin said mockingly, "Gosh, that's the most unbelievable thing you've said this whole time being here."

Max flicked a tater tot at Dustin's direction. "Can it, Henderson, before I make you can it."

Lucas laughed, taking Max's side. "You better do what she says. Remember what she did to Billy! Oh, sorry, was that going too far?"

Max waved him off, dismissively. "Not at all. I'm the one who nearly castrated him with a baseball bat, now THAT was going a bit too far."

As Jane watched her friends talk, she took her second bite, savoring the sandwich as she did. Looking up from her sandwich, she saw two girls that she didn't recognize approach the table. One was a redhead like Max while the other was an Asian girl who was fidgeting with her sleeves. The group stopped talking when the girls showed up, looking as if they were expecting to sit down with them. Jane turned to Mike, hoping he would tell her who the girls were. Apparently

reading her mind, Mike shook his head for 'no'. That was when Dustin and Will spoke up.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot about introductions," Will started, "Um...this is kinda awkward but guys, this is Nina Huang. She's the rich girl we've read about in the pamphlets, remember? Max and I met her a few days ago. I was gonna ask if it's cool if she hung out with us from now on, I guess it just slipped my mind."

Nina awkwardly waved at the group and Jane waved back, not realizing that she was the only one waving.

"And this is Kira Bartlett," Dustin cheerfully exclaimed, "She'll be joining us too! Also, I just wanna say that all those rumors about her...complete bs."

"Says who!" Lucas exclaimed.

"Says me!" Dustin crowed back.

Kira, who was chewing a stick of gum, blew a bubble before throwing up the devil horns as her way of saying hello. "Sup, poindexters."

Jane waved hello again, still just as awkward as her last one. The group turned to Mike, who then suddenly realized everyone was waiting for him to say something. He nodded his head, apparently having no problems with the two girls.

"Look, I've learned my lesson from last year," he said, looking at Max as he did so, "Any friend of Dustin and Will is welcome at the table, alright? Besides, I'm not the leader! Y'all can do whatever you want." Jane could have sworn that she heard Will whisper, 'I thought you were the leader' but she chose to let it slide.

"Thanks," Nina said as she sat next to Will. Kira, on the other hand, motioned for Dustin to scooch down so she could sit. Although there was nothing wrong with her asking Dustin to move over, it was how blunt she was about it that threw Jane off.

The group, now a party of eight, continued to eat. As lunch went on, the two girls formally introduced themselves. Kira, who Jane noticed was a lot more lively and talkative than Nina, talked about how she

was new in Hawkins and that she hates the rumors about her. Meanwhile, Nina, who only talked when someone was directly talking to her, talked about her family and how embarrassing it was that she had the reputation of "the rich girl" at school. For the most part, the two girls seemed normal and fit in with the group's dynamics. Jane could've sworn that she saw Dustin blush when Kira laughed at one of his jokes while Will was genuinely excited to draw with Nina. Despite this, Jane kept her eyes on the new girls, still trying to gauge their personalities. She didn't necessarily get a bad vibe from them but she knew better than to trust strangers.

The lunch bell rang and the group threw their trash away to head to class. Jane had fifth period theater and dance which she shared with Dustin (Dustin: "Ugh, it's probably gonna be lame. But it was either this or woodshop. Blech, I'll take the fancy acting over chopping wood"). On the way out, Nina managed to throw her trash away but accidentally got one of her sleeves caught on a part of the table that was protruding out. Without much force, Nina yanked her sleeve, accidentally tearing it. She yelped and suddenly grasped her sleeve to make sure no one saw any part of her arm. Will approached her, asking if she was okay, but she gently pushed him back, surprising Jane. It was the most movement that Nina had done since joining the group, which was concerning.

"Oh my god," Jane said, looking at Nina's sleeve, "That's unfortunate."

Nina fidgeted with her torn up sleeve. She began to sweat, which made Jane even more curious. *It's just a shirt. Yeah, it sucks that it's torn, but it's nothing to get too upset over.*

"Sorry everyone," Nina said as she grabbed her backpack, "I have to go. Will, I'll see you later?"

Will furrowed his brows, confused, but nodded anyways. "Um, sure, I'll come by this afternoon-"

"-yeah, sounds good, bye!" Nina stormed out, not looking at anyone as she left. The group watched as she left, perplexed. Jane wanted to go after her but at the same time, she had just met this girl. She didn't want to intrude on her space, especially since it looked like she wanted to be alone.

As the group split for their classes, it was down to Jane, Dustin, and Kira as they headed for theater and dance. Kira stopped just as they reached the door, motioning that she had to leave. Before she left she turned to Jane with an odd smile on her face. *What's gotten into her?*

"Alright Dusty," Kira said, "I gotta go. Algebra 1. But I look forward to our game of Dragon's Lair at the Palace. Can't wait to see you in action."

"I'm gonna beat it this time!" Dustin exclaimed proudly.

"You should come with us, Jane. It'll be fun."

Jane nervously looked at Dustin, who had a look on his face that was begging for her to say yes. She really didn't want to be rude but she didn't know this girl that well. It took a while for her to get used to Max so making another friend seemed like a daunting task. As she pondered Kira's question, she thought back to what Jim told her before he dropped her off at the school. Although it was fine that she had many friends who were boys, she only had one real friend who was a girl. He really wanted her to make friends with the other girls at school since she lost a great deal of her childhood.

I mean...what the hell. Hanging out with Kira wouldn't hurt. And Dustin will be there too! What could possibly go wrong?

"Sure, I'd love to," Jane heard herself say. *No backing out now.*

Kira smiled, happy to hear what she said. "Great, it'll be fun, I promise. Also, this is a little awkward but...Dustin told me how close you were to that Mike Wheeler guy. Now, there's nothing wrong with him, I think he's a nice guy but...okay, look, I'm new to Hawkins and making new friends is a little...tiring. I want to take this one step at a time. So, if you don't mind, can you not invite him to this little hangout?"

Wait, what? Why this all of a sudden? "Um...that's a little weird, don't you think?"

"It is! But I just think it'd be better for me if it was just us three for now. I mean, sitting with everyone during lunch was already

exhausting enough. Plus, I wouldn't want Mike to feel like he's obligated to hang out just because you're there. I mean, he probably has other plans this afternoon and it'd be a little rude to force him to come along."

"Hmm...I guess that makes sense." Jane wasn't aware of any plans that Mike had after school but Kira did have a point about bothering him. Jane never wanted to be a burden and although Mike loved her, he was still his own person and had boundaries she wanted to respect. Plus, it's not like they lost any time with each other. They were essentially together every day after she had returned to the group. Hanging out with Dustin and the new girl without Mike for one night wouldn't hurt.

"I just gotta let him know," Jane continued, "He might get confused if he finds out we didn't invite him to the Palace."

"Of course, I totally understand. Anyways, see you two tonight!"

Jane and Dustin waved goodbye as Kira left their sight. As the two entered the theater and dance auditorium, it suddenly occurred to Jane that Kira had gone down the wrong hallway. Algebra 1 was on the other side of the school. *She's probably just lost.* Jane tried to convince herself that that was what happened. She had a gut feeling that it wasn't.

HOPPER

Date: First day of school

Time: Morning (after dropping off Jane at school)

Location: Police station, Hopper's office

"Heads up Jim, we got a bigwig on the way."

Flo stepped out of his office and as she did, she pointed to the man in the cowboy hat who just stepped into the station. Hopper nearly spat out his coffee when he saw the U.S. Marshal badge on the man's chest

as he approached his office. *Fed? Here? What happened now?* Jim stood up and opened the door to greet him.

The U.S. Marshal reached out to shake Hopper's hand, which Jim accepted. The man's grip was firm and Hopper could feel several hard calluses on the man's palm. "Ah, you must be Chief Hopper. Name's Aaron Flint, I'm a U.S. Marshal as you can tell. Sorry if I didn't message the station ahead of time, I've been a bit busy and it just slipped my mind. But I'm here to discuss some...troubling developments. Mind if we talk in your office in private?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Jim said as he stepped aside to let the Fed into his office. Jim closed the door and, after making sure no one was looking in, he brought down the curtains as well. The fed took a seat while Jim sat back down in his chair. He wiped away a sweat forming on his brow, nervous about the situation. Knowing the U.S. Marshals from past experience, this probably meant one thing; federal fugitive.

"I'm looking for a man," Marshall Flint said, "Fugitive from California, wanted for several murders, arson, and a whole bunch of other, nasty crimes. Name's Adam Noone."

"Never heard of that name."

"Well, I envy you. First time I heard about what this man is known for, I wanted to get my memories scrubbed out. It's not a pleasant story, I can say that much. At the time of his capture, he was nicknamed by the Californian news outlets as 'the Stockton Strangler'. However, the public recognized him by a different name...Mr. No One."

What the hell? Sounds like a ghost story. "Why 'Mr. No One'?"

"Well, for one, it's his last name but split. But also...from the witnesses and survivors we deposed, he got that name because he really was 'no one'. He was a complete nobody who nobody gave a shit about, until he went crazy and started killing people. I've done my own research and it's hard to find anything on this guy. His past is shrouded in mystery and, as far as we know, he has no living relatives. No past, no friends, no family...he's no one. That's my own

interpretation of his nickname."

"Jesus...so why you here? You think he's in Hawkins?"

At that, Aaron shifted a little in his seat, uncomfortable at the thought. "I hate to trouble you. I know this town has had its fair share of...danger these past few months. I actually followed the story about how the government accidentally killed that girl. It's messed up, just thinking about what the bigwigs at the Pentagon did to the people here."

Hopper sighed. *If only people knew the actual truth behind Barb's death.* "But anyways, I have reason to believe Adam Noone might come to this town," Aaron continued, "Because one of the survivors of his rampage...is Max Mayfield. She moved here recently."

What!? Max? She never mentioned this. Hopper sat back in his seat, contemplating the situation. It wasn't a monster from another dimension but it was definitely a monster. He then looked at Flint, who was studying Jim's face. There was a sternness to Marshall Flint's face that Jim admired since it reminded him of his generals back in Vietnam. He wondered if Flint served in 'Nam as well. "Yeah, the Mayfields and Hargroves are new here. They never talked about California and they certainly never mentioned an Adam Noone."

"I would assume so. That girl has gone through a lot, I doubt she would want to bring it up again. I figured that's why she got her family to move to Hawkins in the first place."

"So what's the plan?"

"Well, we're not 100% certain that Mr. Noone has come to Hawkins. I'm mainly here on my own accord. But if I find evidence that he has arrived in Hawkins, then I will need the local police force to help me in his capture."

"Absolutely, you got it."

"I just wanna emphasize that this man...I watched Max Mayfield's interview after Mr. Noone was captured the first time. She described meeting the man as 'staring into the eyes and seeing nothing but pure

evil'. And knowing just how he carried out his crimes and other facts about the man...I'm inclined to agree. This guy's a whole other beast. All I'm saying is, don't take this man lightly."

"Understood. I'll keep an eye out."

WILL

Date: First day of school

Time: Afternoon (around the time that Lucas encounters Estelle)

Location: The Huang family mansion

"So...this is the mansion."

Will Byers could feel his eyes bulge out as he took in his surroundings. Just the lobby alone was bigger than his own home and he had never seen this much marble in his life. He didn't count the quarry since this was refined marble, made to look good for the rich and powerful. Nina chuckled to herself as she watched Will marvel at the house.

"Jesus Christ, you actually live here?" Will said, mentally cursing himself since he already knew the answer to his question. Nina chuckled again.

"It's a bit...gaudy," Nina said as she ran her fingers through some curtains by the windowsill, "My parents love being all extravagant and stuff. I hate it though. I just wanna blend in with everyone here."

"Hmm...as someone who sits at the bottom of the student body in terms of popularity, I wouldn't mind standing out more. Maybe we can switch lives for a day?" Will and Nina chuckled at that.

"You think I can handle living with your mom and brother?"

"Well, be prepared for my mom's oldie dance lessons, Jonathan filming everything, and my dad coming every now and then, drunk as a skunk, just to yell at the house. But we do have a pretty sweet

wood fort near the house."

"I know, I was there, and you really need to make it more comfortable to sit in."

"Hey! We did our best, it's not our-"

"-Will, I was joshing you. I love Castle Byers, it's a nice place to just...sit and think." Will nodded, agreeing with that sentiment.

As Will finished looking around the lobby, a lanky white man with tattoos on his neck approached the two freshman high schoolers. He had a plate of cheese, which Will thought was a bit much. *Is Nina trying to impress me? If she is...then damn, I am impressed. Whatever she's doing is working.*

Nina waved hello to the tattooed man. "Oh, hello Lester, thanks for the cheese. You didn't have to but-"

"-your mother insisted," Lester said as he presented the plate to Will, "She said that she's proud of you for making a new friend and wants to make Master..." Lester trailed off, waiting for a name.

"William Byers," Nina said.

"Actually, I prefer Will-"

"-Master William Byers, make yourself at home. Any friend of Madame Nina Huang is a friend of the whole family. So, Master William, which do you prefer? We have brie, anejo enchilado, bellavitano, ricotta, gouda, roquefort, quark, provolone. That's just to name a few."

I recognized like...two or three names. "Um...do you have string cheese?" Will joked as he took a piece of the bellavitano cheese cube. He popped it in his mouth and as soon as he took a bite, he felt as if he had bitten into a slice of heaven. He closed his eyes, savoring the cheese, and at that moment, he realized that this was only one of the many possible benefits of having a rich friend. He could definitely get used to living like this. "Holy crap, that is some good cheese."

"The bellavitano?" Nina interjected, "You can have a full brick if you

want, I don't mind. I'm not a fan of cheese so you can have as much as you want."

"Yes please!" Will said, a bit embarrassed at how excited he was. Nina chuckled as she ordered Lester to get a brick of bellavitano cheese from the kitchen.

The two high schoolers then moved further into the mansion. Nina began chatting away, talking about the history of the art pieces that Will encountered. It was a stark contrast from when he first met her and how she acted at lunch earlier that day. Shy, wanting to be alone. But here, she was actually talking more than Will. She didn't hesitate to fill his head of her knowledge of art and even cracked a few jokes every now and then. Will was happy to see Nina happy. But part of him felt that she was only this way because she didn't have anyone else to talk to about art. It was either that or she just really didn't do well in group settings. Thinking that way made the tour feel bittersweet.

At the last piece of art, which was a giant painting in the mansion's library (Will: "You have a library!? Wow, you'll never have to register for a library card! Lucky!"), Will stopped in his tracks when he saw what it was. It was the lion's head with the rings surrounding it. The symbol on the invitation pamphlets was unsettling enough but seeing a large-scale painting of it, where the lion's head looked like it was staring right at your soul, made Will feel sick. Will nervously looked at Nina, who looked just as disturbed by the painting as he was.

"So," Will started, "I guess that weird lion thing isn't just a picture on a piece of paper.

"I hate those pamphlets. I wished my parents chose a more...pleasant looking symbol to put out on the invitations. But they insisted that it'd be the scary lion painting that I hate."

"Any thoughts on this one?"

Nina shrugged. "No clue, William. I've asked my parents and the servants about this painting ever since I found it. Every time I ask, I'm told to keep quiet. Apparently, it's not something I should talk or know about."

"That's a little...creepy, don't you think?"

"It is but I'm just a 'kid'. Nobody takes me serious around here so it's easy to just ignore me whenever I ask."

"Well, what's your best guess? Why do you think your parents insist on using this particular symbol?"

Nina turned to Will, her face contemplating on Will's question. It looked like she had something to say but needed to collect her thoughts in order to tell them. "Um...I don't know. I mean...I have a guess but I could be wrong."

"Well, shoot, I'm all ears."

"Okay...so this might be a bit strange but...what do you know about the Bible?"

Alright, we're off to a weird start but then again, this is a very weird situation. Will took a minute to collect his own thoughts. "Well, there's a lot to say. Jesus died for our sins, Delilah cut Samson's hair, David killed Goliath with a rock...what does that have to do with the lion's head?"

"So, when you think of an angel, what do you imagine, William?"

"Person with wings? Halo over head? Comes down to fight demons?"

"Okay, let's focus on the first thing you said. See, here's the thing about that image. That's a very popular depiction of the angel. I mean, I talked to you about Christian art when we were going through the gallery. But the thing is...what we think of as angels may not be accurate. I've done my research and the craziest thing is that angels don't necessarily have wings. There's no mention of it in the scriptures!"

Will took a step back, surprised at the revelation. *God, I really shouldn't have skipped out on Bible studies with Lucas.* "Okay...okay, that's...weird but I can accept that. But I still fail to see how that relates to the lion's head."

"Well, I did more research on how angels are actually described and

if I had to guess...this painting is a blend of two different types of angels; the ophanim and the cherub. Well, it's not exactly like the cherub but you can see the influences!"

"Um, I'm not an art or Bible expert so you're gonna have to explain this to me."

"Oh, sorry! I haven't talked to anyone about this so I just assumed...never mind. So, the cherub is this monster-looking angel with four heads, and one of the heads is-

"-a lion's."

"Exactly. Now, I wouldn't have made that connection if it weren't for the rings. Without the rings, it's just what it is; a lion painting. A scary as hell lion but nothing out of the ordinary. The rings is what makes me think that this is a painting of an angel since the rings are designed like how the ophanim are described."

"And the ophanim are described...how? They're rings?"

"Well, not exactly. The ophanim are described as this wheel-like structure with eyes. They're like...chariot wheels since, you know, the Bible is super old. It's easy to miss since you can't really see it in this painting but if you look really closely, there are clearly slits on the rings around the lion's head. You can easily imagine the slits as closed eyes."

Will took a closer look and nearly gasped when he saw that Nina was correct. It surprised him even more when he noticed what looked like lashes on the slits. Nina's theory seemed far-fetched but the more that Will analyzed the painting, the less insane it sounded.

"So you think this is an angel?" Will asked.

Nina shrugged again. "That's my best guess. I wouldn't have said anything if it weren't for the slits on the wheels. Even then, I don't know what the hell it means. I guess my parents are super religious or something. But if that's the case, I don't know why they have to act all secretive about it."

Will sighed. He was hoping to not get creeped out on his first visit to

the Huang family mansion. The last thing he wanted was any more strange things happening to him and his friends. True, being scared of a painting and learning a different side about angels in the Bible was nothing compared to being controlled by a monster from another dimension but it was times like this where he wished his life was more mundane. The more he looked at the painting, the less he wanted to be in Nina's home, even though he knew it'd be rude to ask to leave for no real reason. Instead, he did what he was good at; he bottled up what he was feeling at the moment and focused on other concerns.

As he stared at the ominous looking lion's head, he suddenly felt a chill in the air and the light started to fade away. It wasn't a sudden change but he could feel the room shifting. Just as he was about comment on the change in environment, he blinked for a second and suddenly, the room changed.

No...no, no, no, no, no. NO. Not again!

"Nina," Will frantically called out, "What just-" Will stopped talking when he realized where he was. He did not miss being in the Upside Down.

Location: The Huang family mansion The Upside Down

Will's breath hitched as he started moving around, trying to find a way out of this nightmare. It had been a year since his last venture into the Upside Down. Despite that, the Upside Down did not change one bit. It was still just as ugly and dark as how he remembered it.

"Nina!" Will cried out. No response, not like he was expecting a response. He decided not to run since this freak episode had to end at some point. He was never in the Upside Down for too long. He just had to wade it out. It was better than bumping into someone or something in the real world.

But what triggered this? Will started to panic as he pondered what

caused him to lapse back into the Upside Down. He thought that he was done with this after Jane closed the gate. He hadn't lapsed ever since. *Was it the painting? Was it Nina? Was it this mansion?* Suddenly, Will dreaded waking back in the real world since that meant being back in the mansion. Something triggered this and he was terrified of what the trigger was.

"Ohhhhhh Willlllllllllll."

Oh god damn it, what was that? Will turned to the hallway leading back to the lobby, scared of what he could encounter. Somehow, the roars of the Demogorgon were less terrifying than someone calling him by his name. To his surprise, it wasn't the Mind Flayer or the Demogorgon. Instead, it was a woman in a white dress. Will was disturbed by the fact that the woman had no face but could somehow speak as if she had a mouth. The woman maintained her distance, choosing only to observe from a distance.

"Welcome back, Will," the woman said again, her voice an unnatural tone, "We missed having you."

Well, I certainly didn't miss being here. "What are you?" Will questioned, "Why am I here? Why is this happening to me?"

The woman didn't respond. Instead, she raised her severely rotten arm and pointed behind Will. Will quickly turned around and saw that she was pointing at the lion painting.

"One face of many," the woman said again as she lowered her arm, "But we are all one and the same." Suddenly, the woman started to change. Will took a step back as the woman's torso practically disappeared and took on a different form. She no longer had a human form, instead resembling the rings around the lion's head. The slits that Will noticed before suddenly opened and he suppressed a scream when he saw that they really were eyes.

The creature then transformed again. This time, it went from its ring-like structure to a giant lion, resembling the lion from the painting. Will backed up right into the painting as the lion roared at him. Then, it began to speak. "Open the gate. You can't keep us out forever. Open. The. Gate!"

And then what? Let another Barb and Bob die? No. Not again. "No," Will said, his voice low and unsure of himself, "It was closed and it'll stay closed."

"-open the gate!"

"You can't force us to! You have no power on our side!"

"OPEN THE GATE!" Will screamed as the lion ran for him. He crawled into a ball, accepting his fate...just as the vision ended. Instead of the sharp, hot jaws of a lion ripping into his skin, it was Nina's warm hands trying to get through to him. Will sat up, breathing heavily. Nina, surprised by his sudden movement, nearly tumble backwards. She quickly corrected herself as Will caught his breath.

"William, William!" Nina said, shaking him as he returned to his senses, "What's wrong, tell me!"

"I," Will started, not sure how to describe his experience, "I...had an episode. It happens from time to time. I'm okay."

"That was not okay! You just...started to blank out and-"

"-I know, I know, it's happened to me before."

"Why are you so calm about this!? You need to see a doctor!"

Will snickered, although it was more of a reflex since he definitely didn't find the situation funny. *I need to see a lot of people just to deal with what I've been through.* "I know, I know. Sorry if I scared you."

"Are you sure you're fine?"

"I am, I am. Let's not mention this to anyone, okay? I don't want to upset my mom and brother. They know about my episodes but...maybe it's best we kept this between us."

Nina studied Will, as if she wasn't entirely convinced that he was okay. After a full minute, Nina just sighed and nodded her head. "Just...as long as you're okay. I won't tell anyone about this."

"Thanks."

"Here, get up, let's get something from the kitchen. Clear your head."

"Yeah, that sounds good." Nina helped Will up and motioned for him to follow her. As she led the way, Will turned back one last time to look at the painting again. He remembered earlier that Nina said she was told not to question what the lion's head meant. That for some reason, it was a secret that she should not dig into. Will didn't want to draw any conclusions but based on what he saw, he was starting to question Nina's family and their intentions on moving to Hawkins.

The lion's head with the rings...so it's a monster from the Upside Down? If that's true...then that means...Nina's family knows about the Upside Down. And they're on the monster's side.

STEVE

Date: First day of school

Time: Night (a few minutes after Steve encountered Kali)

Location: Harrington residence

The microwave went off just as 008 started to wake up. Steve immediately ran to the kitchen and pulled out the bowl of chicken soup that he had been heating up for the girl. Since his attention was on the girl, he forgot how hot the bowl was and nearly dropped it as he took it out. Luckily, he saved himself by placing it on the counter and grabbing a pair of oven mitts to help him bring the soup to the girl.

Several thoughts were racing through Steve's mind at the moment. Who was this girl, how was she connected to Eleven, who is Mister No One, why is she so malnourished, and on and on and on. But at the moment, he was focused on helping the girl since she looked like she had gone through hell. The bruises he noticed on her were a mix of new and old, leading him to wonder what kind of monster she had escaped from. He was originally going to take her to the hospital but

then quickly dropped that notion when he realized the dangers of alerting the government. All that needed to happen was for the staff to identify this girl and it was back to Hawkins being under government surveillance. At least, that's what Steve assumed would happen. Jim Hopper had gotten lucky enough when he convinced Sam Owens to give Eleven a new birth certificate and identity. With this new girl, Steve didn't know what to expect.

Please be as sweet as Eleven. Or, at the very least, just don't try to kill me.

The girl groggily shifted on the sofa that Steve placed her on. She turned to him, apparently catching the smell of the chicken soup. "What happened?"

"You, uh, passed out on my front yard," Steve said, trying his best to sound calm and gentle in order to not freak the girl out, "You weren't out too long. I made soup in the meantime for you, since you look like you need the boost."

"Thank you...um...I never got your name."

"It's Steve. Steve Harrington."

"Hello Steve. I'm Kali. Kali Prasad." Kali looked at her sleeves and noticed they were rolled up. She sighed as Steve placed the soup on the coffee table next to her. "You saw my tattoo."

"Yeah...eight. Believe me, I've seen some strange things in this town so I'm not even surprised."

"The less you know about the mark, the better. I mean it."

"Too late. I already know what those numbers mean."

Kali furrowed her brow, surprised at Steve. "What are you saying? You know what the 'eight' means?"

Shit, well, I'm here now, gotta commit. "Um...sorta. I don't know what '008' means exactly, but I do know a certain someone with an 011 tattoo."

Kali smiled at that. "So you know Jane. The real her. That's good to hear."

"Yeah...anyways. Look, I just met you so I don't know what to make of you yet. Right now, all I know is that you told me to find Jane Hopper and tell her that the 'redhead' is coming and that I should be on the lookout for a Mister No One. Can you please give me some coherent answers here? I mean, I made you soup! The least you can do is help me out here."

Kali chuckled at that as she motioned for Steve to give her the soup. She shifted again, this time to move herself into a sitting position, and took the bowl. She didn't bother cooling down the soup as she took a big spoonful of broth. Kali coughed a bit and rubbed her ribs as she took in another spoonful of soup.

"I actually prefer tomato soup but this will do," Kali said with a chuckle, "Thank you again."

"I'll make sure to make you tomato soup next time. But only if you ask nicely."

"I'll keep that in mind. Hmm...you called her 'Jane Hopper'. Kira said she went by that name now. I knew her as Jane Ives, I guess she changed it after she left. Is she fine? Did anyone hurt her?"

Steve threw his hands up, unsure how to answer that. "Last time I checked, she just had her first day of school. Nothing happened. Supposedly. I don't know, I don't keep track of my friends as much nowadays for...well, personal reasons that I don't wanna get into." Steve decided to leave the details of him leaving Hawkins for the military out of this conversation. This stranger didn't need to know EVERYTHING about his life.

"That's good to hear. The part about her being safe, not your personal life."

"You still haven't answered any of my questions yet. Who is Mister No One? What redhead? Are you talking about Max Mayfield? She's the only redhead I can think of. Please tell me now because I need to know if the girl I've been babysitting is actually a psycho killer or

something."

Kali sighed. She downed the last of her soup (Steve: "Wow, you finished that a bit too quickly") and placed the bowl on the coffee table. "I don't know if I can trust you."

Steve snorted, annoyed. "Gee, thanks a lot. I make you soup and this is what I get in return-

"-you didn't let me finish. I don't know if I can trust you. But you know Jane and judging by how you talked about her, you care about the girl. You listed her as one of your 'friends'."

"I do care about her. She's Chief Hopper's daughter so I have to."

"I don't know if I can trust you...but I have no one left. Family doesn't want me, Jane left me, and every other friend I've made is dead."

Steve gulped, the word 'dead' ringing in his ears. "Jesus...what happened to you?"

"...the redhead happened. Her name is Kira Bartlett. I don't know who she is or where she came from but...something tells me that we come from the same place. She knew everything about me. About my powers, about Jane and her powers, and the stuff that happened in this town. And for some reason, she wants us dead. She ran through my entire crew and knew exactly how to take me down. I didn't even get to say goodbye to my friends. But then, she made it worse. She kept me alive, just so I could warn Jane that she was coming. It felt like I wasn't even...a person to her. I was just some puppet to push around. She gave me to the end of summer to warn Jane. But I never got to Hawkins."

Putting the pieces together, Steve said, "Because of Mister No One?" Kali nodded her head and shuddered at the memories.

"I was on my way to Hawkins. I couldn't take the bus because of the authorities looking for me so I stuck to hitchhiking. One of the groups who picked me up was apparently being targeted by Mister No One. There were seven of them, all college students on their way to this campground for summer vacation. They were so innocent...so young.

And Mister No One killed them all. I can still hear their voices, screaming at me to help them. He was going to kill me...but like Kira, he kept me alive. He imprisoned me for months, called me 'Barbara' for whatever reason. And every time I asked why he was doing this, he made my conditions worse. I only managed to break free because of sheer dumb luck. If there's one thing I learned during my time in Chicago, it was how to pick a lock. Saved me many times before, including now."

"How long ago was this?"

"I got out this morning. Look, I don't think Mister No One followed me but I know how this situation looks. I'll leave in the morning to find Jane so you don't have to worry about anything."

Steve waved her off. Although he was scared for his life, especially knowing that there was a serial killer on the loose, he was not about to let Kali leave in her current state. One bowl of soup was not going to suddenly erase the months of malnutrition that she was clearly suffering from. He felt that he was going to regret this but at least he wouldn't have a guilty conscience telling him that he abandoned a malnourished girl in her time of need. "No, you stay and get better. I don't want you passing out on anyone else's lawns, okay?"

"I don't wanna burden you-"

"-hey, come on, it's fine. This is me, saying you are welcome to stay until you get better. Here, I'll talk to Jane tomorrow for you so she could come by on her own. You focus on gaining your strength back."

Kali smiled at that. She shifted again, lying back down on the sofa. Steve, on instinct, grabbed the nearest blanket and covered her. "Thank you, Steven."

"Steve is just fine. Only my dad calls me Steven."

"Should I be worried? I don't think your parents would be pleased if they spotted me here-"

"-they're out of town, like always. Don't worry too much about them." *It's not like they worry or even care about me in the first*

place. Steve stood up and walked over to the light switch to get ready for bed. Before he turned the light off for Kali, he turned around with a question in mind. *Since this girl had the same tattoo as Jane...does that mean...*

"So," Steve started as he gathered his thoughts, "Since you're from the same program...or society, or whatever as Jane...what can you do? Make lava? Shoot ice beams?"

"I can make people see things that aren't actually there. Dr. Brenner called it 'mental hallucinations'."

"Can you do it on me? Just as a demonstration?"

Kali frowned, which surprised Steve. He didn't mean to offend her but something about what he said made her upset. "That's the thing Steve...I don't know when it started but...I think my power is fading."

JOYCE

Date: First day of school

Time: Night (right after Murray shows up at the door)

Location: Byers residence

"Sit on the couch and don't touch anything."

Joyce kept her rifle aimed right at Murray Bauman's head as he moved inside and sat down on the couch. He held his hands up, making sure he didn't make any sudden movements. Will and Jonathan kept their distance, with Will standing by on the phone.

"Should I call the police?" Will asked innocently.

Murray's eyes lit up at the suggestion. "Yes, please, tell them I need to speak to Jim-"

"-not yet, Will," Joyce shouted, "Don't talk to my sons, got it?" Murray

sighed, annoyed, and turned his attention back to Joyce.

Lowering the rifle, Joyce took a seat opposite of the man. At the moment, she only had one question and she was going to get answers. "You told me the CIA murdered Sarah Hopper. Now, unless you want the biggest beatdown of your life, you better explain yourself."

"I can, I can," Murray said, "I just want to emphasize...the information I received...people can die from it. Just look at me. Look at my car. I'm afraid to even just step out now, that's where I am."

What the hell? Just what kind of shit did this man get involved in? Joyce shifted a little in her seat, keeping her hands on the rifle as she did. She turned to her sons, who looked distressed at the situation. "Jonathan, baby, go get my cigarettes please. And Will, go into your room and lock the door. Mommy's got this."

Both boys didn't question her. Will walked away, locking the door as he did. Joyce suspected that he was talking to his group of friends on his walkie but that wasn't her concern at the moment. Jonathan then walked up to her, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter at hand. He handed both to Joyce and Joyce immediately lit a cigarette. She savored the smoke, which helped calm her down.

"Who are you?" Joyce asked, "What's your name?"

Murray raised an eyebrow before turning to Jonathan. Joyce, puzzled, carefully watched the man's face as he turned back to her. "I'm Murray Bauman...huh, so I guess Jonathan never talked to you about me."

Jonathan immediately cringed at the mention of his name. Joyce turned to Jonathan, who had a guilty expression on his face. "How do you know Mr. Bauman?" Joyce asked, trying not to sound agitated.

Jonathan couldn't even look at Joyce, too distressed and full of guilt to do so. "Last year, he helped me and Nancy expose part of the truth about the government and Barb. We needed his help in dispersing the information we got from Dr. Owens. Murray's...eccentric but he's a good man, that much I know-"

"-you met this man and you never told me! Jesus Christ, what the hell Jonathan!?"

"It never came up! And I knew you would just get angry at me and then get Nancy in trouble so I just...never mentioned him. I'm sorry!"

Joyce facepalmed, too frustrated to answer back. Murray could only watch, his eyes begging for Jonathan to help him. Taking back control of the situation, Joyce motioned for Jonathan to sit in the chair next to her. She was still angry at Jonathan but now was not the time.

"If it's any consolation," Murray said, trying to sound reasonable, "Nothing bad happened to Jonathan and Nancy."

"Why would I assume something bad happened to them? Why did you even have to bring that up?"

At that, Murray shut his mouth in fear of angering Joyce.

"Alright, Mr. Bauman," Joyce said, doing her best to mimic Hopper when he interrogated people, "Let's do this again. So, my name is Joyce Byers. You apparently know my son and he says you're a good man. I wanna remind you that my son is barely out of high school so he may not know any better. Now, I don't know what your stakes are in helping our town or Jim but since you did help expose the government's corruption here...then maybe you just might be a good man. Now, before you start explaining to me, in great detail, why the CIA murdered Sarah Hopper, tell me why you care. What do you get out of this?"

Murray shrugged, unsure how to answer the question. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Mrs. Byers...I'm not invested in Hawkins. Or anyone here, really. With the exception of Jonathan and Nancy, of course. But anyways, I'm here because I hate this government and I hate the secrets they keep. I helped expose the government's actions here because I genuinely believe what they were doing here was wrong and disgusting. So yeah, I could care less about helping Jim Hopper avenge his daughter or whatever. I'm doing this because helping him will hurt them."

Joyce turned to Jonathan, who nodded his head. "You can trust him, mom. I believe him. Remember, he did the same thing for me and Nancy. He didn't have to...but he did."

Joyce sighed before taking another big puff of smoke. "Okay then...so you're doing this because you want to take down the big bad government. Nothing personal. Now, I wanna emphasize this. There was a period of time where Hopper and I had some...distance. He moved to New York after his stint in Vietnam. Now the one memory I cherish from that period of time was Sarah. She and Hopper visited Hawkins from time to time and she was the most wonderful little girl you'd ever meet. Jim actually wanted me to be her godmother. He also wanted my last boyfriend, Bob Newby, to be her godfather. And when that girl died...we all felt it. Jim was never the same. Even with Jane, you could tell he still thinks about Sarah. Losing Sarah almost destroyed him and it's a damn miracle that he came back to us. So, when you say that the CIA murdered Sarah...that she didn't develop cancer on her own...that someone had the gall to do this to someone who didn't hurt anyone in her life...this may not be something personal for you but for us, it's pretty damn personal. You think I'm scary when I'm angry? Jim would rip the world apart to find the people responsible. So, do you now understand what you're dealing with here?"

Murray nodded his head, a bit shaken up from the story although Joyce blamed the fact that she still had the rifle.

"Alright then...give me a name," Joyce said, "Who gave Sarah Hopper cancer?"

"Well, forgive me if the story is a little long. Before I give you a name...you need context."

"I have all night. Talk."

"Okay. Well, for a living, I collect information about the government. You could say I'm a 'journalist' in that sense. From what I learned in my research, Jim Hopper served in Vietnam. Decorated soldier, well-liked by the other grunts...whatever, not important. What is important is 1968. The Bueller-Orville murders."

"What's that?"

"Well, two U.S. journalists, Wendy Bueller and Jamie Orville, were found killed in a U.S. Air Force base in Vietnam. They were covering the chaos in Khe Sanh when apparently, they uncovered something else. A massive drug ring that was being led by this corrupt special forces guy. The two journalists were killed but their story was still spread by four soldiers who they contacted in case anything happened to them. And one of those soldiers just happened to be Jim Hopper. With the military investigating the murders of the journalists and the drug ring, a lot of soldiers and officers were taken down. It was like a domino, once the top guy was toppled over, everyone associated with him fell next. Now, two people who were taken down were members of Project Expansion."

"-Expansion?"

"Yeah. Expansion aka Eleven. I knew that this town had a girl with psionic abilities but now, I can put a name to the face! Eleven."

Holy shit, this guy knows about Eleven. Now things are getting a bit scary here. "Keep going, Bauman."

"Oh, right. So, it turns out, one of the chief financiers and a leading scientist on Project Expansion got caught in the drug ring bust. They were doing it as a side gig apparently. I don't know, my contact never knew why they were involved in the drug ring but the point is, they were and they got busted. Straight up, red handed with their hands in the cookie jar. Hopper had nothing to do with Expansion until these two guys got caught. Now, it was originally planned that no retaliation would be taken against the four soldiers. The Expansion team wanted to keep things quiet and any assassination attempts would just draw even more media attention. And besides, this was just a spillover. Hopper and the other three only thought they were taking down a drug ring. They knew nothing about Expansion. I don't even think they met the two Expansion members who got busted. But...the scientist who was caught had other ideas."

"Is this the guy who killed Sarah?"

Murray paused. He slowly nodded his head, worried about how Joyce

would react.

Joyce felt her jaw flinch. She calmed herself down and looked Murray right in the eyes, as if she could see into his soul. "What's his name? Give me a name for the son of a bitch."

"His name...is Hans Fenstermacher. He wanted some form of vengeance against Jim but he couldn't authorize a hit on the man. No one on the Expansion team wanted to retaliate, not even the head guy. So then, he got the idea of going after Sarah. If he couldn't hurt Jim, he was going to hurt him in some way. Sarah was the easiest target."

Joyce squeezed the armrests, trying to calm herself down. "How did they do it?"

Murray sighed. He had the look of a man who was disturbed by what he knew. "It ain't pretty, that's what I'll say. There was a...program...that Expansion was working on. Something to do with radiation or something. Sarah got 'sick' one day and went to the hospital. Who knows if she was actually sick or if someone fed her something...that doesn't matter. What matters is that Sarah was in the hospital, right where they could control everything around her. The doctors told Jim that they were running 'tests' on Sarah to figure out why she got sick. In reality, they were pumping her full of radiation as part of the 'program'. And like every subject who signed up for the program, she developed inoperable cancer. It was the perfect cover too. Sarah was already sick and the doctors used this to feed lies to Jim. It started off with telling him that she just had a bad case of the flu and then, a few weeks later, the flu turns into cancer. And they made him believe every lie."

Silence. Joyce was stunned at the story, not sure how to process it. She looked at Jonathan, who was just as stunned. She wanted to break something. To burn something. She wanted to vent her anger in any way. But now was not the time. She needed to stay focused, stay calm. Hans Fenstermacher. The name now left a bad taste in her mouth. If there was any destroying to be done, it was going to be directed to this man. She didn't know what the man looked like but he may as well have been Satan himself.

"That's everything?" Joyce asked.

"I'm pretty sure there's more but that's what I got so far. And the reason why this information is so dangerous should be obvious. Ever since Martin Brenner got taken down, all of Expansion is in chaos. Leaks are everywhere and the government is doing their best to silence everyone involved. Hans, though...he's the one you should be afraid of."

"I want to rip his head off."

"Yeah, I do too. But he's more dangerous than you think. Now that Brenner and Expansion have crumbled and the fact that a lot of time has passed to the point that the government wouldn't care if Hopper were to die now, there's nothing to hold him back. He's still angry about the drug bust. Even after Sarah, he still wants Hopper's head on a pike. And he's the only one of the four whistleblowers still alive."

"How do you know the other three are dead?"

"I read it in one of Expansion's classified documents. And it's the kind of classified where I could go to prison for the rest of my life if someone knew I read the contents. That is, unless someone kills me before I reach the prison grounds."

"Jesus Christ, Bauman, how did you get all of this? Who's your contact?"

"Someone who Hans also wants dead. Look...this Hans guy...that man's cleaning house. He's not gonna rest until everyone who knows about him and Expansion is dead." At that, Bauman removed his glasses and pointed at the obvious hole where a bullet ran through it. "Look at this. Look at my car! That's all him! And he's starting to make moves in Hawkins. He's the real reason why the Mayfields and the Hargroves moved to this rinky dink smalltown."

"Wait, what?" Jonathan interjected, "What does this have to do with Max and Billy?"

"Oh, you don't know?" Murray said, his eyes wide, "Neil Hargrove and Susan Mayfield's company, the Defenders! That's Hans' private army."

You really think Neil 'I wanna expand my business' Hargrove would pick Random Town, Indiana as his place to expand? No, that family is in on the whole thing. Hans slipped right under all of your noses just to get close to Jim. And you welcomed him with open arms because Neil said he could 'improve' Hawkins' economy! This town has set themselves up for a bloodbath. And I kid you not, the only reason why Jim is still alive is because of Eleven. Hans knows fully well just how powerful that girl is. He sends in twenty soldiers, he's gonna get twenty body bags. But she won't protect him forever."

"Then what do you propose? We can't go to war with these guys! I...work as a cashier, for god's sake. Jonathan is gonna be a photographer, and a great deal of our group are just kids! We can't just move either, we don't have that kind of money. And where would we move in the first place!?"

Murray smirked. Joyce didn't like it when he smirked. The man was already sketchy to begin with so she felt a bit uncomfortable at following the man's lead.

"Well, I know someone who could help," Murray said, "That's another reason why I'm here. My contact. I got all of this information from someone who wants to help. Hans wants him dead too so he's doing this for his own survival. He's hoping that if I talk to Jim Hopper and explain the situation, he'd be willing to put aside differences and join forces."

"Who is this guy?" Joyce asked.

Murray smirked again. "Martin. Brenner. I think you two have met. He's eager to meet all of you but wanted me to make sure that you won't shoot him on sight. I can take you to him if I have your word."

KAREN

Date: First day of school

Time: Night

Location: Wheeler residence

DING DONG

Oh no, please don't let it be him. Karen Wheeler stood up from the sofa and approached the front door. She opened it and sighed in relief when she saw that it was Nancy.

"Hey mom," Nancy said as she walked in, dropping her backpack to the ground, "Dad asleep?"

"Yes, like always," Karen said, slightly annoyed. Of course Ted Wheeler was asleep in his chair, as usual.

"Well, I'm going to bed. Been a...really weird night. Need to lie down."

"You okay, Nancy?"

"I'm fine...just...it's been a really weird night, let's just leave it at that." Nancy headed upstairs and Karen heard her bedroom door close behind her. Karen then turned back to the front door. Just as she was about to close it...she saw him. Still just as fine as she last saw him but not as confident as he usually was.

"Hey Mrs. Wheeler," Billy Hargrove said, "Mind if I come in?"

"Were you following Nancy?" Karen said, not sure why that was her first thought.

"No, no, I was headed here and...I guess Nancy and I showed up at the same time. She didn't see me though."

"Right."

"Can I come in, please? Just for a little while?"

"Billy...just go home. It's late."

"...I can't. Not now. Please, don't make me go home right now."

Karen felt sorry for the boy. Problems at home, that was for sure. During their one night together, Billy had mentioned it in passing. *"Oh, my dad's a bit of a hardass," he had told her in bed, "I don't*

want to talk about him." Just from his tone and how he looked, Karen could tell something was up. But knowing that Billy got in trouble for their one night together was enough of a sign for her that she needed to end things before the situation got worse.

"I'm sorry Billy. I'm really, really, sorry but you can't come in."

Dejected, Billy punched the air before walking away. He let out a yell of frustration as he walked down the street to his car. Just to make sure he didn't try anything rash, Karen waited until Billy had driven away. She then closed the door and sighed in relief. She felt terrible but it was better than inviting in any more trouble. *Crisis averted...for now-*

"Who was that?"

Karen nearly had a heart attack when she saw Ted standing by. He was still groggy from having just woken up.

"Nothing," Karen lied.

"Sounded like something."

"You're overreacting, it was nothing. Now, you can head up. I'm still waiting for Mike to come home."

Ted yawned, apparently dropping any suspicion he had. As he walked away, Karen began to sweat. She was not about to let any of her secrets be exposed but it was getting more and more difficult trying to keep her life intact.

ELEVEN

Date: First day of school

Time: Around 6:00 PM (during Estelle's encounter with Troy and James)

Location: Hopper family cabin

Jane fumbled with the keys as she opened the door to her home. It was still a strange feeling to have the keys to the cabin but Hopper seemed to trust her enough with them. Dustin and Kira marveled at the large, homely cabin as Jane closed the door behind her, although she forgot to actually turn the locks. *Eh, no one comes by to visit anyways. Besides, if anyone from the group came by to visit, they'd let me and dad know ahead of time.* She dropped her backpack, kicked her shoes off, and took a seat on the couch as Dustin headed to the bathroom. Based on the way he ran, he was close to bursting.

"Been holding this in for the past few hours," Dustin said as he frantically closed the door behind him.

Jane chuckled at him as Kira looked around the cabin. "Don't strain yourself, Dustin!"

"Shush, Jane! Don't talk to me while I'm in here!"

Respecting his privacy, Jane dropped the conversation. Turning her attention to Kira, Jane noticed that she was still moving around the cabin, fully exploring her surroundings. That was something Jane had noticed while out with her and Dustin. She just assumed that Kira was just naturally observant and loved to explore on her own. Still, it was strange watching the girl look around the cabin as if she were investigating a crime.

Overall, bonding with Kira was an...interesting experience, to say the least. Right after school ended, the trio visited the Palace to play Space Invaders. It still bothered Jane that Kira told her not to invite Mike but those thoughts quickly evaporated when she started having fun with her new friend. Dustin was right; she was nothing like how the rumors described her to be. Kira was funny, witty, and best of all, she was a girl. Bonding with Kira made Jane realize just how starved she was for more female friendship. Max was great and all but she was her sole female friend. It felt nice to branch out. In comparison to Max, Kira was a lot sassier and daring. She mentioned being nervous around new people but that wasn't what Jane picked up on. Jane decided that maybe Kira was lively only around certain people. She could definitely relate in that sense.

"Nice place," Kira said as she traced the edge of one of Hopper's

cabinets. Jane cringed when the memory of her destroying the cabinet in a fit of rage came back to her. She could still see the chipped pieces of wood and the broken nails.

"It's a little messy but it's home," Jane chirped, "If I had known about you and Dustin coming over, I would've tidied up."

"That's okay. No complaints here. I mean, all of this is a bit spontaneous."

"Yeah. I guess so." *Spon-ta-ne-ous. Maybe if I nod, it'll look like I know that word.*

"How long have you and your dad lived here?"

"Two years, I think?"

"Long time. Ever consider moving into a normal home? I mean, nothing wrong with a cabin, it's just...most people in this town tend to live in either those suburban houses or a trailer."

"That's up to my dad. I don't mind either way."

"Right, right. As long as you have a roof over your head, you know? Anyways, I'm gonna check on Dustin. I think he has my keychain. Be right back." Kira patted her pants just to make sure. Although Jane thought it was weird for her to check on Dustin while he was in the bathroom, she didn't voice any concerns. Kira left her sight and Jane went to work in the kitchen prepping food for her guests.

Being only (supposedly) fourteen years old, she was no culinary genius but she could make a solid Eggo dish on her own. Hopper had shown her how to make his famous triple-decker Eggo mountain surprise and she started by toasting the waffles. She had just popped in the first two Eggos in the toaster when Kira came back. Jane waved at her but Kira didn't wave back.

"How's Dustin?" Jane asked, "His stomach's not too bad, right?"

"He's fine. Too much pizza I suppose. I wouldn't worry too much about him."

"How come?"

"Oh, because this next part doesn't require him. I really like that boy...he's one of the few people I've met who I genuinely like. But, I came to Hawkins for a reason. I had a nice time meeting you and your friends. But it's time to pay up."

"Wait, what are you-"

POP POP

The two soft darts hit Jane right in the middle of her chest. She gasped as she fell to the floor, the box of Eggo waffles crashing right next to her. The feeling in her back was gone and she could barely move her legs. She raised her hand, hoping to shove Kira back but the second she tried using her powers, she realized what just happened. Her eyes went wide when Kira didn't fly back like how she thought she would. *I can't push her back. I can't...I can't do anything! I can't feel my arms...my legs...what's happening to me!?*

Kira walked over to Jane and lightly kicked at her, trying to provoke her. She smiled as she knelt down to speak directly to Jane. Jane watched as Kira dangled the dart gun in front of her face. She pulled the darts out of Jane's chest, which Jane groaned at in response. "Damn, that stuff works fast," Kira said, "Perhaps I should've gone for a smaller dosage though, since you seem to be paralyzed right now."

"What did you do to me!?"

"Well, it's simple. In case you don't know, I just shot you with two solid doses of hydroxyl. Never heard of it? Of course you haven't...because the U.S. hasn't introduced it yet. Papa Brenner and Uncle Hans did have a use for it though. It affects brain activity and, somehow, it lowers it for a short period of time. The medical field doesn't want it for obvious reasons. On a normal person...it could give them permanent brain damage. But the CIA found a use for it since, for people like you and me, one small dose can take away your powers for a few hours. And trust me when I say...these aren't placebos. You aren't imagining any of this. You couldn't even lift a penny in this state."

What the...who the...who is this girl!? How does she know Papa!? Jane tried to move away but realized that she couldn't move. Most likely, it was a side effect of the drug. Kira took advantage of this and lifted her up, dragging her to the sofa as she did. Jane couldn't fight back as Kira propped her body on the sofa. As she did, she also went into her backpack to look for something. Jane gulped as Kira pulled out a large pistol.

"My prized possession," Kira said as she showed off her gun, "Bit bulky and recoil sucks but...it's reliable."

"Who...are you," Jane asked, "Why are you doing this? How do you know-"

"Brenner? Hans? Well...you at least know Brenner. I don't think Uncle Hans ever visited you. Not according to the files I found. But if you wanna know how I know, here's our connection. Look...we're almost matching."

Jane felt her gut drop as Kira raised one of her sleeves and showed her the 017 tattoo. *She's...she's a sister? No...it can't be!* Jane squirmed as Kira rolled her sleeves back up and took a seat in front of her. Kira didn't have her gun aimed right at Jane but it felt like she was at gunpoint, regardless of where Kira was.

Kira relaxed in her seat, staring daggers into Jane's eyes as silence crept into the cabin. Jane began to wonder why Dustin was still in the bathroom but she was starting to fear the worse. *No, don't let her know you're upset. Don't feed into her.* Jane kept her composure and watched Kira carefully.

"So...before this goes any further," Kira said with a sneer, "I'm gonna ask you a few questions and in fairness, you can ask me your own once I'm done. First, tell me Jane. Did Kali Prasad ever meet with you this summer?"

Oh no...what did you do to Kali? Jane shook her head for no.

Kira sighed, visibly annoyed. "Knew I couldn't trust one of our own kind. This is what I get for playing it a little too adventurous this time around. Usually, when I go on the hunt, I try to play it

methodically. I find the target, I pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses, I take them out, and I make sure I leave no trace of what I just did...even if it means taking out a witness or two. Sometimes, my plans don't work like how I intend but I'm also good at improvisation. But one thing I tell myself not to do is be arrogant. I got a little carried away since I thought it'd be fun to hunt both you and Kali at the same time. Guess I trusted Kali a bit too much."

"Did you hurt Kali? What did you do to her?" Jane dreaded whatever the response was but she needed to know.

"She's fine...hopefully. I don't know where she is right now but it won't be too difficult to find her. As for the rest of her crew...not so lucky."

Jane fought back the tears as Kira's words started to sink in. She only knew them for a few hours but they understood who she was and welcomed her. Sadness turned to rage when she realized that Kira had killed them all in cold blood. It didn't matter what the reason was, what mattered was what the girl did. As the anger built, Jane realized that she was gaining back control over her body. Her powers were still gone but she started getting feeling back in her arms and legs. Even if she didn't have any powers, Jane was going to punch this girl in the face, gun in her face or not.

"So, since Kali didn't inform you about my arrival, I guess I owe you an explanation," Kira said, "None of this is personal, I want to emphasize that. Well, I mean, it is personal in a way but you're not who I'm trying to hurt. Papa Brenner is the one who needs to burn, which is a sentiment I think we both share."

"Papa is dead. He was killed two years ago." Jane remembered the words of the scientist who told her that Brenner was still alive but chose to not bring them up at this moment.

Kira chuckled. "Oh, he's dead now? I guess that guy who I shot at a few weeks ago just happened to look like Papa. Jane, he's alive. I don't know where he is but he's alive. And...I know you know he's alive. Don't play dumb. You may have been raised in a cell but you're not stupid."

"What does it matter anyways? You hate him...I hate him. We both hate the Bad Men. So why go after me? After Kali?"

"So just because we have these tattoos, suddenly that means we're a sisterhood?"

"No....I mean, you know what I've been through. You know how bad Papa was and how he treated the others like us. We should be helping each other, not tearing each other apart."

"Ah, you see, this is where you and I differ. You see...I had an epiphany a few years ago. It's hard to describe but there was this moment where I realized that killing Papa isn't enough. Kill one bad man...another takes his place. Topple one dictatorship, another dictator takes control. Violence begets violence, it's a cycle. Stop me if I'm going too fast, I know that--"

"I can keep up. Like you said, I'm not stupid, okay."

"Of course you're not. So, as I was saying...I once thought that if I killed Papa, all of my problems would be gone. Simple, right? But if he were to go, someone else would just take over his work and continue preying on little girls like us. Little boys as well, as long as they have the 'gift'. Or curse. We're too valuable as assets. So if this cycle is to end...if we truly want to stop Brenner and his legacy...all of it needs to be gone. Wiped off the face of this earth. Every scientist involved, every person who ever had anything to do with Brenner and his sick experiments...even us. We need to be eradicated so that no one can use ever again--"

"You know that includes you, right? What, you plan on killing yourself once you're done?"

"I'm prepared to do so."

Jesus Christ, this girl is crazy. "That's bullshit, Kira! Are you even listening to yourself right now? Kali was doing what you're doing now! I was helping her! We all could've helped each other! But killing all of our kind? Killing yourself!? The goal was for us to live normal lives--"

"Your goal, not mine. Not everyone shares your point of view, a valuable life lesson you need to learn. Besides, you really think any of us have a chance at living a normal life? Face it, Eleven, we're stains on society, we're freaks of nature that shouldn't exist. No one among Brenner's subjects can live a normal life."

"You don't know that!"

"Oh, I don't? I'm the prime example. I go around, killing people. I don't have a home, friends, and family. Kali too. She's a wanted criminal who terrorized Chicago. And all the others I've met have also been the bottom of society. Richard Tozier? He liked using his powers to rob banks and the wealthy. Iris West? Had a sick obsession with animals and attacked anyone who she thought was hurting the wildlife. And then there's you."

"What about me?"

"Well, you opened a gate to another dimension and got a lot of people killed. Barbara Holland and Bob Newby didn't even know you existed and they're dead because of you."

"I didn't kill them--"

"Yes you did--"

"The Mind Flayer killed them! Not me--"

"And we wouldn't have had to deal with the Mind Flayer if you had just kept your powers in control!"

"Oh, it's so easy for you to judge me. I was forced to do what I did. You think I WANTED to open the gate? What the hell is wrong with your head!? And you know what...I may have made mistakes but at least I corrected them. At least I used my powers to save people. You're the one who's pathetic! All you know how to do is kill. And the thing is...no one is forcing you to do any of the bad actions you've done! Before you start calling anyone a monster, you need to look at yourself! You're more of a monster than I'll ever be!"

Kira looked visibly stunned at that. Even Jane was surprised at her own outburst. Visibly shaken, Kira stood up and walked over to the

kitchen. Although she tried to maintain a calm composure, she suddenly lost her cool and flipped over the dining room table. Jane winced as she saw the record player get knocked down as well.

Kira took a few deep breaths to calm herself down. She then turned to Jane, this time with her gun raised. Jane braced herself for the shot. "You're right...I am a monster. I'm Big Bad Seventeen. You heard about my reputation, right? I killed an entire biker gang for trying to cut my hair?"

"I assume you did, right?"

"Sorta. But they didn't try to cut my hair, I don't know where that came from. What they did do was protect 009. Poor little Richard Tozier, loved to rob banks and the upper class. Thought he was above the law and normal people in general since he had the power to control metal. Made a lot of criminal friends in the process. And when they refused to give him up...I ripped them all apart. Even the ones who surrendered. You see, Jane, unlike you, I can see myself and all of our kind for what we really are. We're monsters, we're leeches on society, sucking the life out of our surroundings. We don't live normal lives, we solely exist to make life worse for everyone. That's why we all deserve to die...the world would be better off without Brenner's legacy."

"But we can be so much more than Brenner's legacy! If you would lower your gun, I can show you. The people here...they don't see me as Eleven. They see me for...me. Hopper sees me as his daughter. Max sees me as her best friend. And Mike...Mike, he..." Jane trailed off, smiling as she thought of him. How he looked at her, how he took her in, how he told her she wasn't a monster and that she was his hero. It made Jane wonder if Kira ever had a "Hopper", a "Max", or a "Mike". It also made her wonder if she would've turned into a "Kira" without the people in her life. Jane shuddered at that thought.

Dear god...I'd rather die than become Kira. Please world, don't ever let me become like her.

Kira spat, rejecting Jane's words. "If you're gonna beg for your life, you could try a bit harder. You can do what Tozier did and offer me money if you want."

"I'm good. How about this, since you left Kali alive so that you can fight the both of us, why not let me regain my strength? Let's fight as equals."

Kira scoffed. "And get my head blown off in the first few minutes? No thanks. It's tempting but I'm gonna play it straight from now on. No more acting like an arrogant jackass, like I did before."

Kira raised her gun and aimed it right at Jane's nose. Not enough of her body came back in time to move away from the line of fire. She closed her eyes, feeling the end was near. *This is it...this is where my story ends. Goodbye everyone...*

"Goodbye Jane. If it makes you feel any better, of all of our fellow brothers and sisters...you were my favorite to talk to. I'll make sure this is quick--"

"-hello?"

MIKE

Date: First day of school

Time: Around 6:00 PM (simultaneously with El's encounter with Kira)

Location: Hopper family cabin

After watching the paramedics take a badly injured Troy and James to the hospital, Lucas, Erica, and Mike began discussing what to do with Estelle.

"I'll let her stay at my place," Lucas had said, much to Erica's chagrin.

"You sure," Mike asked, "I mean, I still have Jane's blanket fort set up, Estelle could--"

"Hey, whenever strange things happen in this town, it's usually at

either your place or Will's. And then Dustin had that thing where he kept a baby Demogorgon in his bedroom. I feel like it's only fair that Estelle stays at my place. Time for me to step up."

"But what if your parents find-"

"I'll deal with it."

"Lucas, this is really dumb," Erica said, annoyed. Lucas turned to her, hands on his waist.

"Erica, I know this is inconvenient but we need to figure out what's going on with Estelle. Can you keep this a secret-"

"Do my chores for the next three months and you have a deal."

Mike chuckled as Lucas facepalmed and agreed to the deal. Estelle, who had been quiet the whole time, turned to Mike, unsure of the plan.

"Are you sure this is okay," Estelle asked, "I don't want to be a burden to anyone-"

"Too late to leave Hawkins now," Mike said, "We need you to meet the rest of the group. Trust us, they're gonna want to meet you."

Estelle nodded her head, a little confused but understanding of the situation. As she left with Lucas and Erica, Mike decided to head over to the Hopper cabin to check in on Jane. If there was anyone who he thought should know about Estelle first, it was Jane. Normally, he would contact her on his walkie talkie and let her know ahead of time that he was on the way. But with his one walkie talkie destroyed by Estelle on accident, he had no way of contacting her.

It'll be okay, she likes having me around anyways. Just gotta hope that Chief Hopper doesn't throw a fit. It didn't take long for Mike to reach the Hopper cabin. He stepped off his bike and tried to peer through the curtains to see what was happening. He felt bad about this; it felt like he was invading their privacy by looking in. From what he could tell, Jane was sitting by the couch. He also saw Dustin's backpack lying on the ground.

Oh that's right, she and Dustin were hanging out with that new girl today. The scary new girl. Sure enough, he saw Kira Bartlett enter the picture. It was hard to tell through the curtains but it looked like she was holding something.

Mike moved away from the windows and approached the door. Without thinking about it, he twisted the knob, surprised that the door was actually open. He pushed the door and looked in on the scene.

”...hello-“

BANG BANG BANG

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the long delay, had a lot of things to do. But I haven't given up on this story! To make up for the lost time, here is an extended chapter which features every story arc introduced so far.

Also, I noticed there's been a lack of Hopper POV this whole story. To make up for that, next chapter will be a standalone Hopper chapter. We'll pick up on the Eleven-Dustin-Mike-Kira cliffhanger next next chapter. I know I left things off at a chaotic moment but that's part of the fun, the anticipation!

Anyways, if you want, please leave a kudos and a comment! Any feedback is more than welcome! Please let me know what you think of the story so far, it helps with the writing process!

P.S. Can you spot the IT references?